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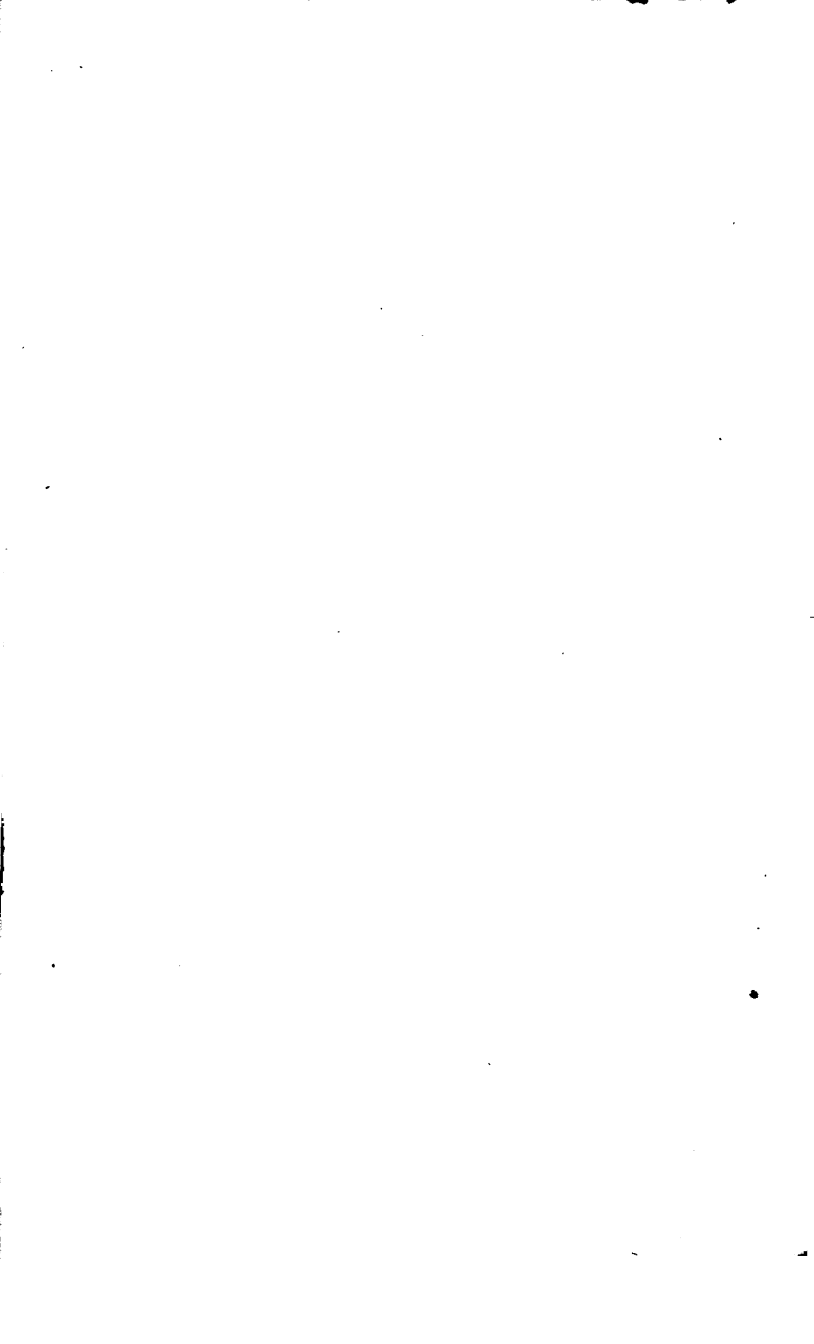
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LYTERIA:

A

DRAMATIC POEM.

BY

JOSIAH PHILLIPS QUINCY.

SECOND EDITION.

BOSTON:

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PREFACE.

THERE is a beautiful thought somewhere expressed by Jean Paul Richter, that, to the Unseen Spirit, each age of the world appears far more noble than in the record it leaves behind. History and tradition tell us, chiefly, of the self-sacrifice of *men*; while another class of heroic dēds — those wrought by woman in her social relations, and consequently unsustained by present applause, or the hope of future fame — are unchronicled.

The purpose of the following poem is to exhibit feminine devotion, put to the highest possible proof; thereby to suggest how often the greatest achievements of man result from domestic promptings, given through personal suffering, that the world suspects as little as it could understand.

The liberties taken with the tradition of the Curtian leap, in its present dramatic form, are excused by precedents too common and well

known to be quoted. The noxious exhalations of the gulf (which have actually attended similar fissures) must be supposed, in order to create a necessity sufficiently strong for so great a sacrifice.

An approach has been made to the unities of time and place. The incidents of each act are given in a single scene, and the period of action is less than three days.

In attempting this most difficult form of composition,—a dramatic poem of artistic construction, elevated sentiment, and forcible diction,—a strong sense was entertained of the many requirements, and consequent possibilities of failure, attending its execution. It was, also, not forgotten that such a production, even when good, is to the taste of comparatively few, and can seldom meet the success of general popularity.

Several lines, purposely incomplete, will be found throughout the poem. Indebtedness is acknowledged to the novel *Zanoni*, for the suggestion of one or two passages in the first act.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

LUCIUS GENUCIUS — *Consul.*

DÆLIUS — *High Priest in the Temple of Jupiter.*

MARCUS CURTIUS — *A noble Roman.*

AULUS AND PROTHUS — *Priests of Jupiter.*

PUBLIUS — *Friend to Curtius.*

LYTERIA — *Daughter to Dælius.*

SCENE — *Rome.*

ACT I.

*Apartment in the Temple of Jupiter — Arch at Centre — Doors
seen through the Arch. Dælius discovered. Enter Aulus.*

DÆLIUS.

THE length'ning shadows tell the hour of prayer
Will soon revisit us. Is all prepared
For evening sacrifice? — our altars heaped
With choicest fruits that frugal Earth provides,
To pay her children's labor? — For this night,
That finds our city bathed in quietness
So perfect, asks a bloodless offering.

AULUS.

All is prepared. Each shrine is decked for service; —
Yet I had thought, upon these festivals,
When men have clamored the high praise of Jove,
For hours in his temple, 't was our custom

To leave unsaid the private ritual,
Which days of quiet pay the setting sun.
Thine age demands a season of repose,
After the tedious rites of sacrifice
But now concluded.

DÆLIUS.

The eternal Powers,
By whom we are created, fed, and blessed,
May justly claim each moment they bestow.
The longest life of man is all too short
To utter his thanksgiving for that word
Which called him out of nothing, and bestowed
Capacity to taste celestial joys,
That, sometime, in this tenement of flesh,
Shadow the great hereafter of our hope.
No, Aulus! while this frame (unbent by time)
Can serve before the altar, be assured
That each awakening morn and closing eve
Shall find me prostrate to adore the Gods, —
Whose blessings showered upon my latter years,
Are concentrate in one rich gift — My Child.

AULUS.

Yes! Well may'st thou be thankful that a form
Of such perfection is but dwelling meet
For the fair spirit that inhabits it ; —
While to our sacred caste, from which the state
Takes the blest influence of domestic ties,
The presence of Lyteria in the temple,
Stands forth a fair embodiment to sense,
Of the pure love and pitying charity,
With which we trust the pard'ning Gods behold
The weakness of their servants.

DELIUS.

Her clear soul
Has been my chiefest comfort, since, preferred
From the rough trade of arms, I chose this place
To wait life's solemn issue ; — and I think
She shall be called to show what virtue gives
The fellowship of those, whose sober office
Best may instruct the mind to follow Truth
Undoubting. She, who died in giving me
This trust, declared by that strange inspiration,

Which sometimes speaks, ere the last thread is broke,
That this our child should be reserved by Jove
For some great service. Thus, her soul received
Sweet consolation for the prayer denied —
That life's last pains should give a son to Rome.
But, Aulus, now no praise of our loved child,
For I must hear no more upon a theme
That never yet was tedious.

AULUS.

Must I then
Believe thy shrinking movement to imply
A knowledge — a suspicion — a vague fear —
That we thy underlings in silence share,
Not daring to becloud the father's heart
With our too ready fancies ? All our priests
Are fooled, to think thy observation dull
To that sad change that must concern thee most.
Yes!—thou hast marked the maiden's downcast brow—
Her thoughtful visage, shrinking from the light
That flashes strangely from her vivid eye : —
Thou learn'st, with us, to deem the hour accursed,

When, at the Consul's order, we received
A noble student in this sacred fane. —
Perish the day when our unwilling gates
Admitted Marcus Curtius !

DÆLIUS.

Nay ! — Enough !

At seeming evil man should not repine,
Since there may lurk a blessing undeserved,
'Neath its dark mantle. Yet, if 't is decreed
That some great trial mark my close of life,
I feel, the humble minister of heaven
Should not lack strength to bear its chastisement.
Still am I blessed ; secure that no reproach
Can ever sully the pure soul of her,
Whose nature, all unselfish, scarcely knows
A struggle in the sacrifice of aught
That men hold dearest ; and whose simple heart,
Warmed by divine affection, finds its peace
In the prime duty of religion — Prayer.

AULUS.

Well may'st thou trust the nurture of the child

Will triumph in the woman. We but feared
No change could bring more happiness to one,
Whose every moment seemed a quiet joy.
Yet if young Curtius, upon whom descend
The wealth, hopes, and ambition of a house,
The noblest in our city — should he be
Allowed to wed Lyteria —

DÆLIUS.

Thou speak'st
The single doubt that weighs upon my soul.
'T is most unlike, the Consul Lucius,
The guardian of Marcus, the tried friend
And kinsman of his father, should forget
The claims of station, family, and wealth,
By favoring a marriage so removed
From all the circumstance of birth and dower,
That such high state and generous service ask.
Yet, if some unforeseen or strange event
Could sanctify this union, I must own
There is no man more worthy the pure love
A maiden's heart can offer, than this Curtius.

His earliest youth was given to pursuits
That have enlarged the patriotic zeal
And soldier's hardness he inherited.
Yet when our legions, with late conquest flushed,
Returned to riot and corrupt discourse —
Our valiant Curtius, upon whom the state
Lavished her proudest honors, putting off
The battered helmet and the well-worn sword,
Came to this temple, in such modest garb
As fits the humble student of the Truth,
Revealed to earth through Heaven's ministers.

AULUS.

Should he deserve thy praise, be well assured
He will break through all barriers that the world
May place between Lyteria and his love.

DÆLIUS.

Yet it would show most foully in ourselves
To countenance a marriage, which must bring
Disgrace upon this temple, if unknown
To Lucius, our Patron. Every claim
Of honor we must grant, through any cost

Of private sacrifice. And now, 't is right
Our daughter should be warned of this resolve, —
And Marcus hindered for some little time
From entering our portals. These two duties
(The first most harrowing to a father's heart)
Must be accomplished ere the risen moon
Shall be reflected in old Tiber's waves.
Summon Lyteria to me : — The first task
Should be the hardest ; I will speak to her —
And after, warn the guardian of the youth,
Whose presence has so broken the repose
That should possess this temple.

AULUS.

Yet observe
How hastily the Consul's officer
Presses through yonder court : 'T is like he comes
Charged with some sudden order of his master.

(Enter Messenger.)

MESSENGER.

Lucius sends greeting to the priests of Jove,
And craves some present conference with their chief.

Before the hour of evening sacrifice,
He will seek Dælius in this place, alone.

DÆLIUS.

I shall await his visit. [*Exit Messenger.*

Now behold,

How some kind fate appears to aid the task
Allotted to my age. The worst must soon
Be over. Even now soft echoes, waked
By a light footstep, tell the near approach
Of her, whose coming brings for the first time
No thrill of happiness, Leave us together, —
But when the final beam of tired Day,
Gilding the antique shield suspended near
The statue of the Warrior Deity,
Shall mark the hour for worship, summon me
To join the evening service. I shall need
The calming rites of sacrifice and prayer.

AULUS.

I shall obey these orders ; well assured
That out of every trouble peace may come,
To those who nobly bear life's discipline. [*Exit Aulus.*

DELIUS.

'T is a harsh duty ! How can I dispel
This dear delusion that has thrilled a soul
With the deep joy of passion !
Vain — vain, for man to quench the heaven-lit flame,
In whose warm glow the Gods permit our hearts
To taste celestial pleasure ! Give me strength —
Strength — to assail the life where most I live.

(Enter Lyteria.)

LYTERIA.

Alone, dear father ! Of the eager throng
Of priests and nobles, that so lately stood
To see this day's great service, has not one
Remained, — not one, to bear thee company ?

DELIUS.

Nay, thou must know, Lyteria, there are times
When the exalted soul craves solitude.

LYTERIA.

I have well known such seasons ; when the mind,
Refined and loosened from the earthly tie,

Which binds its essence to material form,
Finds human sympathy far, far below
The sphere where it inhabits.
Then, we must seek communion with bright things
That ever float about us. Unperceived,
These phantoms are to this, our mortal sight ;
But their sweet presence, mocking aid from sense,
Inspires the doubting soul with trust divine.

DÆLIUS.

Happy the breast whose consciousness is filled
With such fair images ! May thy young heart
Cleave only to such fancies. Let thy love
Exhaust itself on nature's endless form.
Impose no hope on aught within the pale
Of this most narrow being ; so shall a state,
The happiest humanity can know,
Be given for thy portion.

LYTERIA.

Thou art wrong,
Father ; thou canst not trust the words thy lips
Have used. Our life sometimes denies our speech.

All the delight that contemplation gives,
Each joy afforded by the natural world,
Shows a dim vision of one perfect bliss,
That is our heritage. My heart has leaped
To see the untired Phœbus coming forth
To work his daily miracle — I knew
An awful pleasure, when the crashing bolt
Told men the wrath of Jove — the glorious arch,
That spanned the clearing sky — the deep repose
Of the moon-silvered lake — the thousand notes
That swell the song of spring — all these have charmed
My growing spirit : — Yet I late have learned
How mortal is such pleasure, when compared
With the great presence of that ecstasy,
Which frees our being from the cell of self,
And joineth soul to soul.

DÆLIUS.

I must be plain,
Since craft of speech ill suits the warning voice,
That nature utters through a parent's lips.
There is no bliss that man should not resign,
When Heaven demands the favor it has lent.

That silence, so long kept between us, child,
Finds here an end. This daily intercourse
With one whom place and rank hold from the choice,
Where young affection points, must cease at once.
When, at the hour of sunset, our huge gates
Swing harshly on their hinges, they must close
For the last time on Curtius : And I warn thee,
By the strong interest that makes thy peace
Far dearer than mine own, dismiss this man
Forever from thy thought.

LYTERIA.

Father, — thou know'st

That I have ever loved thee ; ever watched
To do thy slightest pleasure. Now a power
That I may not resist forbids obedience.
All my existence is so bound with his,
Whose love paints life like some rare festival,
That separation would but cause the soul
To break this feeble fetter of dull earth,
And wander forth to seek *his* company.

DÆLIUS.

Thou show'st, my daughter, that rebellious will

Which cleaves to our base nature ; strongest ever
When our desire must waste unsatisfied.

LYTERIA.

Nay, let us think that nature's noblest strength
Is only waked by trial ; that Devotion,
Unknown save to its object, may be shown
Before the world, and conquer every doubt
That shadows what we are.

DÆLIUS.

My words have been
In kindness ; that thy heart (our purpose known)
May seem to offer freely the release,
That else must be compelled.

LYTERIA.

No human power
Can separate the souls that fly together
By sacred impulse, and a law as fixed
As that which holds night's burning fires in air,
And brings to man their lustre. Our weak bonds
Fetter in vain the hands of Destiny.

For I have learned that pure and holy love
 Is unextinguished by the chilling touch
 Of earth, which soon must cover our frail forms.
 But, if the soul continues to exist
 In a more glorious being, so shall those
 Affections which made up its life increase
 To nobler fervor — Vows that here unite
 Two kindred hearts shall be preserved forever.

DÆLIUS.

Enough : — my cruel duty is discharged.
 The task that yet remains must be performed
 By stronger hands than mine.

The eastern gates

Admit some strangers — Yes ! the Consul comes,
 Surrounded by his household officers ;
 'T is as I feared — He brings no comfort here !

LYTERIA.

He does — he does — for Curtius follows him !

[Enter Lucius and officers. Lucius salutes Dælius, and they pass through the Arch at centre, in conversation. Curtius comes forward to meet Lyteria.]

CURTIUS.

The closing day reserves its richest gift
To crown the final hour. This evening meeting,
Longed for through all the feasts and sacred rites
To-day has witnessed, now appears a joy
Deeper than dreams can bring us. Few awake
To find the fair imaginings of night
Endowed with substance at the touch of Day.

LYTERIA.

I do return thy greeting ; and confess
My heart is stirred with a divine emotion,
As these fond eyes again are filled with thee.
Yes ! There may be all human bars between us —
Wealth, rank, the world, the will and chains of power,
But there can be no longer that Abyss,
Whose blackness, ere our mutual love was known,
Kept us divided.

CURTIUS.

We need have no fear
That any cloud is lowering above.
This day I have revealed my dearest wish

To Lucius ; who, with a father's power,
Unites a father's kindly interest,
In all I have at heart. We shall be joined
With his approval, and thy gentle soul,
Purer than mine, shall ever bear it up,
E'en as the smoke of sacrifice ascends
Freighted with prayer to Jove.

LYTERIA.

So may it prove !
And yet there is a something whispers here,
That warns me of a dark and trying time,
That lowers in the future — No, 't is not
The mocking trick of Fancy, — for last night,
While sleep restored the body, I beheld,
Robed in celestial beauty, a bright form
That smiled upon me sadly, and breathed forth
Words, whose clear utterance thrills my waking sense,
As I recall them : —

*“ Daughter, do not shrink
From any grief the Right may offer thee : —
A perfect love is ready to resign*

*Its object, when that object's truest fame
Demands a sacrifice so terrible."*

CURTIUS.

Why, what a curse were our existence here,
If the distorted visions of the night
Revealed our future !

LYTERIA.

Yet some seasons come
To every life, when the dark veil is lifted ;
When we behold things, which shall be hereafter, —
And thus receive warning, impression, counsel,
Not brought through avenues of mortal sense.

CURTIUS.

Think only of the present, which appears
So prodigal in blessing.

LYTERIA.

Know'st thou all !
My father has declared against our union,
And asks a resignation of that love
I pray each hour to make more wholly mine.

CURTIUS.

I will not question that thy soul disdains
Submission to such order !

LYTERIA.

For thy success,
Or thy true glory, I could yield all claim.
But for another cause, never — O, never !

(Enter Lucius and Dælius.)

LUCIUS.

Nor shalt thou, Maiden, for the heavens smile
On such devotion, and no act of mine
Shall thwart their higher pleasure. Rome has heard
Thy judgment, Marcus, much approved of late
In gravest matters — and we trust it here.
Receive the sanction of thy father's friend,
Who willingly resigns those final trusts,
Placed in his hands, to shackle at the need
Youth's hot intemperance. Fortune is thine ;
And that high place in the regard of men,
More to be coveted. A deathless fame
May be thy future portion, if found true
To the fair promise of thy early days. —

And for you, lady, see you bear yourself
Worthy a Roman wife. Let no weak love
Restrain our Marcus from those stony paths,
That men must tread to glory. Make thy praise
Ever his great incentive to those deeds,
Which best become his place and family.

CURTIUS.

No doubt can rest on her ; — and my own life
Shall speak the value of the priceless gift,
I here do swear to cherish.

LUCIUS.

Dælius, yield
A tardy sanction to thy daughter's choice.
Lyteria fears her father's chiding voice
Alone may mar this hour of happiness.

DÆLIUS.

Jove's blessing be upon thee, dearest child,
And keep thee to his service ! So shall He
Enrich the parent heart which now is called
To yield its nearest trust. When late we parted,
I used the words that duty seemed to prompt.

The Consul Lucius (so I truly thought)
Would ask a proud alliance for the youth,
His care had reared to service of such honor.
But since his presence dissipates this doubt,
I here do give thee freely that poor leave,
Which only sternest duty held before.

LYTERIA.

Father, no new relation can absolve
Thy child from filial piety and love.
It still shall be my pleasure to support
Thy failing steps, and gently ease the slope
Toward nature's end, that none should tread alone.—

My feeling, sir, will not permit my lips
To thank *you* as they ought. I rather stand
Like the false virgin of Rome's early day,
Bowed with the weight of gifts the Heavens send
In answer to my prayers.

DÆLIUS.

All thou shouldst say,
I have endeavored to interpret here.
Our guest is recompensed in joy bestowed ;

The same reward that blesses the kind Gods
For all their favors. Yet I marvel much
What feeling prompted such a generous deed,
Not tending to the haughty interest
Of your patrician rank.

LUCIUS.

To answer that,
Recalls a memory, the stricken heart
Has silently endured. Labor and Time,
Our grief's great comforters, can never heal
The burning wound from whence — when early love
Is crushed by Power, and trampled to the dust —
Ebbs daily our best life. I have done service
To this great city ; and the world has hailed
My progress, as I walked the dangerous path,
Trodden by those who covet its applause —
Yet, I have borne about me a great void,
That no distinction, no success, can fill. —
But this dark grief has taught me to respect
Another's joy ; and never to incur
The wrath of Heaven, by sundering young hearts,
Whom power divine impels to seek each other.

DÆLIUS.

Our best instructions oft are found in strokes,
That torture as they teach. By such dark ways
The light of knowledge surely is revealed
To the truth-craving soul. Thou seest yon shield
Already gilt with the last beam of day, —
Even so the night that comes upon our hopes
Shall make our lives display some kindly deed,
That the high noon of bliss had never brought.

LYTERIA.

If through our woes some thankfulness should shine,
Must we not, wrapt in blessing, recognize
The favors Heaven hath lately dealt to us ?

DÆLIUS.

We are reminded well : The wonted time
Of evening adoration is at hand —
Our priests approach to service : May our hearts,
Replete with gratitude, breathe earnest prayer !

*[Doors at the back are thrown open. An altar is
discovered. Aulus and other priests enter.]*

The Act closes.

ACT II.

A public square before the Temple of Jupiter. — Enter Aulus from the temple, meeting Prothus.

AULUS.

WELCOME, good Prothus ! Blessed be the god,
Who to this needy fane returns thy steps.

PROTHUS.

A power divine indeed has led me back ; —
For by those natural warnings, which the skilled
May read to their great profit, I perceived
A sudden call for my poor ministration,
Before these altars hallowed by the past.
Moved by such mystic impulse to resign
The quiet country, — where my wish had been
To waste some days inactive, — I have come
Eager to take the duty fate assigns.

And now, I pray thee, Aulus, quickly say,
What great event has hither beckoned me ?
This spacious place, traffic's accustomed mart,
Is clothed in silence. At the outer gate
The watchmen glared upon me as I passed,
And bid me turn from the devoted city.
No busy hum in the frequented street
Stifled the frightened echo. Haggard men, —
Tutored to bear in Penury's hard school, —
Whose only roof has been the heavy clouds,
That yet are fixed above us, screamed that Jove,
Wakened to wrath, would crush the guilty earth,
And hurl it back to chaos. Speak at once,
What panic frenzies Rome ? What cause demands
Language so fraught with terror ?

AULUS.

Alas ! The secret cause of wrath divine
Is only uttered by inspired lips,
Through which the god breathes darkly his behest.
Already messengers, despatched at dawn,
Haste to the favored oracle, where Jove
Reveals his awful will : at their return

A solemn sacrifice must be performed
In our own temple ; when our priests shall learn
What expiation Heaven will accept,
To free the city from this chastisement.

PROTHUS.

May some atonement, to avert the doom
I gather from thy words, be granted us !
Now, speak the grief that weighs thy spirit down : —
The power of Evil which assails man's life
Hath put on some strange aspect ; yet the grief
Of each hot shaft, winged through the constant strife,
Is something soothed by friendly sympathy.

AULUS.

The greatest sorrow needs the smallest speech
In its rehearsal. Briefly then — Last night,
While certain of our priests lingered to hear
Of the approaching marriage, which our chief
Shall shortly consecrate, between young Marcus
And the dear maid, whose presence melts the chill
Which often rests upon devotion's shrine, —

While, as I say, we stood in eager talk,
The silver beam that Cynthia's crescent shot
Upon the pavement changed to lurid red ; —
Yon massive walls were heaved this way and that,
Until the rocking floor threw on their knees
All waiting in the temple ; — as to show
That on the prayers her priests should offer Heaven
Hung Rome's sole hope of pardon. Then, there came
A prodigy more dreadful. The bright shield
Our fathers fixed, a votive gift before
His imaged form, who gave their wars success,
Leaped from its place, and, striking at our feet,
Shivered in ringing fragments !

PROTHUS.

A sure sign,
As our best Augurs ever have declared,
To warn the city of impending ill.
After this prodigy, did stillness reign ?

AULUS.

A calm succeeded ; — yet the clouds, whose pall
Still presses on us, hid the lighted Arch.

The heavy breeze, muffled with sulphurous smoke,
Brought distant voices ; — Terror's piercing cry
More and more keenly rent the startled air, —
Till soon a noisy crowd, beating our gates,
Called Dælius forth to quiet their dismay,
With words of manly calmness. Then we learnt
How great convulsion tore the heart of Rome,
And with its awful signet stamped our world.
The unknown force that rocked our trembling walls
Had spent its fury near the Capitol : —
With startling might, it rent Earth's flinty breast,
And ere the frightened watchers could express
Their wonder by an uttered syllable,
There yawned, e'en at their feet, a gulf profound ;
While falling arch and palace shook the earth
With massive fragments. Yet I have declared
The smallest part of Rome's calamity.
For, from the dark abyss, whose gaping mouth
No human power may fill, a vapor thick
With deadly pestilence blights those poor homes,
Which Ruin, satiate with man's proud works,
Left unmolested. To abate this plague
We wait in fear the Oracle's response ;

Firmly resolved to gain the heavenly grace,
By any means that grace may furnish us.

PROTHUS.

Now, I perceive, men have good cause to leave
Their daily business, and besiege each shrine
With penitential offering. May the Gods
Who so afflict us, moved by earnest prayer,
Declare what expiation Rome may give,
To win again their smile ! Yet 'mid this grief
Did I not hear one blessing all may share ?
This marriage — Have I understood thy words ?
Shall the fair dawn of promise flush the cheek
Of our loved inmate ?

AULUS.

'T is a joy that glows
Through darkness such as this. No cruel fate
Limits young passion, that may now invest
Its dreams and hopes with substance. Yet we see
Those patient services remembered still,
To which Devotion gave Lyteria's youth.
For in the midst of pestilence she stands,

With woman's tenderness to ease the couch,
Where dying lips first murmur with a prayer.
To the departing soul, her presence seems
Fit comrade for earth's past inhabitants,
Who, purged from mortal weakness, shall receive
The spirit newly ransomed from its bonds, —
And bear it up enlightened.

PROTHUS.

But alone

She cannot watch in the dark house of death.
Surely, young Curtius waits with zealous care
To shield, with love's protection, the frail form
Encompassed by such peril ?

AULUS.

'T was his prayer,

Earnest and oft repeated, to decline
The offered mission to the Oracle,
'And to attend with her the sad abodes,
Where customary duty beckoned. But the maid
Claimed his permission to discharge alone
Her wonted charity ; — bidding him speed

With other nobles, to the shrine where Jove
Speaks through his chosen agent. "'T is the Right
That now divides us," ('t was her parting word)
" You go in pomp, the state's ambassador,
I, as the humble almoner through whom
Some higher spirit may impart its grace ; —
Our duties, different in the eye of man,
Shall be of equal merit, if performed
With constancy, high purpose, and such strength
As Heaven may send to aid our feebleness."

(Enter Dælius from the Temple.)

DÆLIUS.

Why stand ye here in idle conference ?
Is it not known the messengers approach,
Bearing the sentence of the Oracle ?
The Consul and our gravest citizens
Are waiting to commence those solemn rites,
Which shall precede the reading of the words,
On which our lives must hang. Haste to your place.
Prepare the sacred vessels ; deok the shrines ;
Lead forth the victims, and make all things fit ;
While I, as is our custom, waiting here,

Receive the bearers of the great response,
And lead them to our Temple ; haste, for time
Bears heavily upon us.

[*Exeunt Aulus and Prothus.*

DELIUS.

How few hours,
Since all about this place were wrapped in peace ;
And I, replete with calmness, as serene
As the smooth surface of the smiling sea,
Before some wrecking tempest ! Trouble came
With great convulsion ; and some mightier throe,
I doubt, must end it. May the bolt strike here !
Here — in this breast, before it touches hearts,
Whom the strong cords of love and earnest hope
Bind firmly to the earth.

The measured step,
And plaintive chant, that fills the neighboring street,
Announce our mission ended.

(*Enter Curtius and the Messengers.*)

Welcome, friends !
The hurried breath, flushed cheek, and travelled mien,
Witness your zeal towards Rome. Breathe for an instant ;

Then ye shall tell the eager throng within,
What message is vouchsafed to comfort us.

CURTIUS.

Has she returned ?

DÆLIUS.

Not yet ; — but I have sent
To bid her leave that pious exercise,
Now fraught with so much danger.

CURTIUS.

Danger ! yes, —
Full well I know the peril ; and would bid
Thy child brave all — all, but the wasting sense
Of duty's call unanswered — to escape
Such fearful service ; but in case like this,
Her impulse, more exalted than my will,
Demands submission.

DÆLIUS.

From her earliest youth,
Such painful charities Lyteria chose
To earn the right to live. 'T was thus she drowned

The constant question that our being asks, —
“What purpose is accomplished in thy life?”

CURTIUS.

O, could I share this labor, I would ask
For her no respite : — But she only sees
The dart that Peril wings to other breasts.
With an authority, and pleading love,
That man may not resist, still she commands
My absence from her danger.

DÆLIUS.

Thou art tried
In this obedience, though 't is well enforced.
For by some hidden grace which Nature gives,
(Showing what duties she should undertake)
A fragile woman oft may stand unharmed,
Where, at each breath, air-tainting pestilence
Strikes giants to the earth. The Gods assign
To each the part best fitted to the strength
Bestowed by nature : to the lusty arm,
Nerved by such mountain air and simple food
As sicken pampered Ease, the work is given

To win the riches that the frugal earth
Hides in her bosom. From the cultured mind,
Rich in experience, mankind should draw
Lessons of wisdom ; while those gentle souls,
In whom affection blossoms, still dispense
Their fragrance to a world that little recks
From whence the sweetness flows. But hardest tasks
Are kept for such true heroes, as outstrip
Their halting generation ; — whose great lives
Old Time shall gently nestle to his breast,
And so bear on forever.

CURTIUS.

My spirit burns to hear devoted deeds
That human will has compassed ; and I pray
That some great service may demand my aid :
So that my name, absolved from fate's decree,
Shall be untouched by the sad law of Earth,
Which blots from memory the life of man,
Before the grave's decay and wasting worm
Consume his mortal dwelling.

DÆLIUS.

Wish for nothing —

Man cannot tell where his advantage lies.
Our humblest duties oft are surer steps
To self-content and honor, than proud heights
Where some rare chance may place us. I have seen
The tortoise, toiling 'neath his cumbrous roof,
Snatched from his fellows by some hungry bird.
Aloft he soars ; till Phæbus' panting steeds
Draw their bright burden upward from the west,
To gild his spotted armor ; — now the earth
Distant, shows meanly ; and the pure, dry air
Plays pleasantly about him, as the fowl
Halts in her quick ascent ; — short is the triumph :
For rushing winds, that every moment cut
More keenly, tell the frightful speed that hurls
The creeping beast to ruin. Now the rock
Leaps to receive him ; while his feathered foe,
Whose lusty wings gave this bright eminence,
With eager shriek invites some distant mate
To share the quivering feast. By this be warned :
For every height on Fortune's dangerous steep,

Which men attain, by outward circumstance, —
Lacking the native grace for such renown, —
Serves but to lengthen out their cruel fate,
When some stern trial, greater than their strength,
Shall dash them to the earth.

CURTIUS.

Thy prudent years
Have never yet lacked specious argument,
To thwart the craving for brave deeds, that burns
In younger hearts, whose native ardor feels
That Heaven asks action, — stern, heroic strife,
As usance due on this great debt of being.

DÆLIUS.

Yet constant effort bravely to discharge
Some humble labor, brings a peace more calm,
Than the brief plaudits of a gaping world.
Freedom to choose, with will sick and infirm —
This is the drug, whose presence poisons oft
The brimming cup that Fortune offers him,
Men call her favorite. See thy peril there.
Chance and young courage have advanced thy state
Beyond the customary mark. A higher place

May yet await thee ; which to fill, requires
Promptness in judging where thy duty points,
With self-control to sink all selfish ends
To aid the general profit.

Now, enough

Upon this theme ; for it is time to read
The oracle's response. Enter the temple,
Brothers, and fulfil your sacred mission.

[Exeunt Dælius and Messengers.]

CURTIUS.

Why stand I here debating with my thought,
What noble deed demands my energy ?
Why envy those apprenticed to some craft,
Which satisfies the soul's demand for toil ?
Wisdom but heralds sorrow ; — since we know
The lofty ends our being should attain,
Though chained by feeling, habit, or by sloth,
To self's cramped dungeon ; and condemned to peer
Through the strong grating which our passions forge,
To keep us prisoners from the cheerful world
Our fancy pictures ! O, for some task prescribed !
Would that some path, clearly defined, though steep,

And hedged with brambles, opened to my steps !
Then, might I win the brightest prize of earth,
The sense of holding claim to that deep love,
Poured from a woman's heart.

(Enter Lyteria.)

The Gods be praised,
Who graciously restore their borrowed gem !
My joy to greet thee from the halls of death,
Would glow in sorrow's drops ; but that to see
Weakness made strength for deeds of charity,
Must make our manhood firmer. Yet declare
Thy safety.

LYTERIA.

Every power is concentrate
In that one sense, that bears thy thrilling accents
To my soul : The air, thus freighted, gives a life
More dear, than winds, fresh from the open sea,
Bring the close street crowded by misery.
Yet tell me, Curtius, is it fit to leave,
Even for time most brief, my chosen place ?
For looking on such woe, who must not doubt
The right to hold a moment's sympathy
From the great sum of human wretchedness ?

CURTIUS.

Thy debts are overpaid ; — Return no more,
Lest the red hand of Plague, provoked too long,
Clutch where I fear to think.

LYTERIA.

Couldst thou be moved
By any selfish dread to leave the post
Ordaigned by Heaven ? No ! — I know thee better ;
And will not think thou askest less devotion
From the firm heart, affection seals to thine.
Such aid as I can give must be dispensed,
Till man shall learn how to assuage the wrath,
Writ with such ghastly sign upon the earth.
Sights have been seen, to move celestial minds,
If their calm state is swayed by human grief.
The dull, cold eye, death's instant harbinger,
Seems fixed upon me yet. The throes of Strength,
Snatched rudely to the grasp of Pestilence —
The wife — the mother — stricken at the time
When woman's care is man's sole comforter, —
The helpless babe, drawing from nature's fount
Not nature's milk, but venom — these dread sights

Weighed on my soul, yet did not crush its life.
But as I gazed upon one last farewell, —
Where youth, with cheek still crimson from the flush
Of answered passion, filled with noble zeal
To win earth's prizes — bent a glazing eye,
For the last time, on one for whose dear sake
He would be tied forever to the form,
Her love had rendered precious — then it was
A sudden horror seized me ; while I shrank
From some dim shadow that seemed floating past,
Whose stubborn finger pointed to this scene,
As something it would have me look upon,
This awful presence chilled my life's warm tide ;
Yet now — how soon such mocking phantoms fade —
Being again with thee !

CURTIUS.

Thou mayest well
Despise such visions ; for no future grief
Can haunt us while united.

LYTERIA.

As the rough furrows that the tempest writes
On some bleak battlement, make sheltered nooks,

Wherein the vine's green shoots may safely cling,
So shall my soul be brought still closer thine,
When Time's rude storms, that wear this outer frame,
Open a nearer passage to thy heart.

CURTIUS.

So fair a plant demands the noblest life,
In him blessed by its fragrance.

LYTERIA.

And unless

All custom'd tokens which to Rome foretell
Her coming heroes, mock us more than such
Great portents have ere this deceived the skilled,
Thou shalt stand forth chief in this generation.
Nay, tell me not that I interpret wrong
The people's voice, for, bruised 'neath such a blow,
Some instinct shows a savior to the crowd.
Just now a thousand voices called thy name,
When rumored wars startled the quiet street,
And Rome would choose her captain. While I passed,
Our gravest senators stopped to salute
The chosen bride of Curtius, whom they named
The city's champion. An aged priest,

Whose spotless soul (so have the mass believed)
Reflects the coming time, bid me deserve
The choice of him elected by the Gods
To save us all from ruin. Have I not
Reason to hold thy future fame most certain ?

CURTIUS.

So thou shalt point the way where honor lies,
None but a craven would refuse to tread
The roughest path at whose extreme may glow
The guerdon of thy smile.

The opening gates
Announce the city's comfort. See what joy
Beams in the general visage. The response
Has been most happy.

(Enter Dælius and Lucius from the Temple, followed by Priests and Citizens.)

DÆLIUS.

Jove be praised, my child,
Who brings thee out of peril ! The stern need
Of thy poor service presently shall cease,
Through his great mercy ; for the priests declare

An expiation, which shall free our lives
From threatening danger.

LYTERIA.

Words are weak to thank
The powers that stretch their mercy to fulfil
What few had dared to hope. This lifted stroke
Must make our life's worst state an instant wear
A lustre to its holder ; while my sky
Loses its only shadow. Say, what act
Of expiation brings the world this peace

DCELIUS.

Thus from his holy shrine proclaimed the God :
“ *The yawning Earth will not be satisfied,
Till she receive what is most prized of Rome,
Into her hungry chasm.*” These few words
Contained our Oracle. Yet, when with prayer,
And grateful sacrifice, our messengers
Begged further knowledge, thus it was vouchsafed :
“ *The treasure that Rome looks to, in her need,
Shineth far brighter to the public gaze,
Than to his eye who holds it.*”

LUCIUS.

Soon shall Rome

Be ransomed from her present suffering :
For Varrus nobly offers his rare gems,
Bright tokens of ancestral dignity,
As the prized tribute Heaven asks from man.

DÆLIUS.

Should it not be our silver statue, clad
By cunning art with Jove's own majesty,
Which is demanded ? This is valued more,
By those who serve within these courts, than pearls,
Or all the brilliants ever brought to deck
The feeble hand of Wealth.

LUCIUS.

Both shall be given,
Lest either prove too small ; and some rich treasure,
Drawn from the public coffers, shall increase
The offering demanded at our hands.
So shall we merit Jove's returning smile
By large obedience.

And now so soon

Must this affliction cease, we turn to business,
Which the strange peril forced us to neglect : —
Marcus, since War may call thee to the field,
'T is well to leave a faithful wife at Rome,
Whose constant prayers may nerve her hero's arm
To deeds of valor.

Come to-morrow, friends,
To this great temple, as the witnesses
Of rites more joyful than this day has seen ;
For two young hearts, here joined by holiest ties,
Shall bless each other. Dælius, prepare
All needful things for this solemnity.

DÆLIUS.

The orders of the Consul are received.

CURTIUS.

Sir, for these last dear words I can but feel,
Not utter, gratitude.

LUCIUS.

See, Publius comes
To interrupt such task ; — or it may chance
The news he bears gives thee a greater still.

(Enter Publius.)

PUBLIUS.

The grateful tidings I am called to bring
Deserve a worthier herald. It is thought,
By Rome's most prudent nobles, that our foes,
Who burn beneath their late discomfiture,
Hearing what panic terrifies the mass,
Will rush upon our borders. Now, our legions,
Filled with such desperate fury as invests
Uncultured minds in great calamity,
Call upon Curtius to command their force,
And lead them on to battle ; while grave men
Trust his known valor, thrice approved in war,
And that paternal virtue, which descends
Upon the heir of true nobility.
Marcus, I come thy suppliant. A place
Beyond thy years, though not thy just deserts,
Sues for acceptance. Nay, receive the trust !
Nor question of thy fitness ; for thy skill,
Quick honor, martial bearing and renown,
Shine brightly in all eyes, except thine own.

LYTERIA (*aside*).

Is this an Echo !

CURTIUS.

The great office, sir,
Which our too partial citizens assign
To one so little tried, demands some fear
In its acceptance. I can only think
How Jove selects the insubstantial cloud,
From which to deal his lightning.

PUBLIUS.

The hope waked
By thy appointment will make strong the arm
Of manhood, and reflush the maiden's cheek,
That pales at soldier's parting. Yet attend,
For by still greater proof, I have to show
The confidence thy courage gives our city.
Know, I am charged to tender to thy use
The antique steel, worn by our greatest chiefs.
In Mars' own temple has this armor hung
A score of years unbattered by the foe.
Only Rome's truest sons must gird their limbs
For battle, in such steel ; but thou, most prized
Of Rome, may'st wear this honored mail unchallenged.

LYTERIA (*aside*).

A son most prized of Rome ! — Why should these words
In characters of fire seem writ before me ? —
Hence, horrible surmise ! — for I have still
The strength to cast thee from my shrinking soul.
Down, ghastly thought, fiend-prompted to my breast !
Leave me ! — It is my order !

LUCIUS.

We receive

In Marcus' name this token ; since the doubt
Of his own claims to this great dignity
Must keep him silent.

CURTIUS.

Common phrase of thanks

Would mock so rich a gift. Say to these friends,
That, as I value favor in her sight
Whom I shall wed to-morrow, I devote
My life to serve the city, and deserve
The confidence her children place in me.

LUCIUS.

Most happily these fortunes fall to us.

Marcus shall take this armor of the priest,
Before he clasp his bride ; showing the world
His honor is more precious than his love.

DÆLIUS.

All thy advancement, Curtius, must reflect
Some lustre on those friends whose early care
Gave thy hot youth direction. Let their words
Still mingle with the witching notes of fame,
That trumpet forth thy merit.

CURTIUS.

With this pledge,
Given to recall thy teachings, they remain
When Time shall wipe all title coveted,
And ancient lore from Memory's full page.

One word from thee, Lyteria ; — that my heart,
Sate with joy, may stifle its own bliss,
And so make room for future happiness.
Tell me that these great favors Rome bestows
Have brought thee pleasure !

LYTERIA (*aside*).

O ! assist me, Gods !

Lest my calm words, striving with dreadful doubt,
Choke in their utterance.

Marcus, all that brings
Thee honor, shall awake my gratitude —
Yet, in this presence, feeling must be awed,
And find few words to dress her thankfulness.

Let me go in — for a dark faintness steals
Over my spirit. Do not fear — It passes —
And seems to draw all weakness from the mind,
High purpose should inhabit. — Ha ! the cloud
Returns ; — but now shadows me tenderly.
A moment in the cooler court within
Will bring relief. Nay, follow not — 'T is best
I am alone.

The Act closes.

ACT III.

The Temple of Jupiter. — Lyteria discovered.

LYTERIA.

The noblest thing in Rome ! Why are these words
Branded upon my spirit ? Hath not Rome
A medicine to heal the earth's scarred breast,
Which asks the labored ore or burnished gem
Drawn from itself, and worshipped with a zeal
Due to the Gods alone ! —

The voice divine
Demands a gift, *prized in the public eye,*
More than in his to whom it doth belong.
Jove's sacred semblance stands therein confessed ;
Holy to our poor vision ; but to His,
To whom 't is dedicate, the grossest atom
Of our dark earth shows with an equal lustre.
For man's proud work more meanly mocks His glory,

Than the poor taper Phœbus' quick'ning beams.
Bending in shame at this familiar altar,
Let me implore forgiveness for a doubt
Of Heaven's forbearance. Hence ! thou dread surmise,
That stabbed my breast deeper than steel could reach !
Let me adore the mercy of the Gods,
Who show how man may expiate his crimes,
Ere they have scorched him into nothingness.

Have I not heard a footstep ! Aulus comes,
To tell the consummation of our hopes ! —
The sound has ceased ; or lived but to my fancy.
Ere this, some token of deliverance
Should have been brought me. —

Ha ! These shouts are music ;
For they arise from the Great Warrior's temple,
Where (after gifts had satisfied the earth)
It was our nobles' purpose to equip
My Curtius in his armor, ere he came
To give me all himself. What ! more applause
Lavished on Marcus ! Rome's great heart is his !
My love has proudest sanction. Why does Joy
Heap its rich treasures on a life so young,

While they whose years of sufferance earn such wealth
Pass to the grave unheeded ! —

Yes ! at length,
My promised messenger returns with tidings.

(Enter Aulus.)

The ransom is accepted ! Rome is saved ! —
Stay not for form, — give air unto your news.

AULUS.

Breathe then, before I utter the sad tale
That makes my message ; for its terror strikes
So nearly at the life, that the light air,
Which now surrounds thy form, will seem oppressed
With poison.

LYTERIA.

“ Poison ! ” — “ terror ! ” — Words like these
But little suit the people’s joyful shout,
That rings from yonder temple. The kind Gods,
Appeased by man’s submission, lift their frown
From the scorched earth ! Our offerings are accepted ?

AULUS.

Alas ! the treasures poured into the gulf

Have not fulfilled the mystic words of fate,
Which formed our Oracle.
With princely largess furnished by the State,
And jewels, Varrus' generous hand supplied, —
With treasures spoiled from palace, and from fane,
In vain we strove to gorge the gaping earth ; —
But still, the pit belched forth its poisoned vapor.
Then, last of all, the Statue, (at whose shrine
Tears, vows, and prayers of generations past,
Melted the Gods to pity,) with great force,
Upheaved from its firm base, in the abyss
With deafening crash descended. Shuddering,
With fear the strange profanity we viewed,
While Dælius raised his voice in earnest prayer,
Beseeching Heaven's grace. But now the earth,
Torn by some new convulsion, hurled our gifts
Back on the trembling plain. Thus are our pains
Rejected.

LYTERIA.

Yet these plaudits that arose
But now, seemed to express some sudden joy.
Go seek their meaning. Any passer-by,

Returning from the neighboring fane of Mars,
Can give solution to this mystery.

[*Exit Aulus.*

My awful fancies clothe themselves in shape, —
Collect, and form a substance palpable,
That chills me with its shadow. — 'T is a thought :
And has not now existence so defined
As the first breath that parts an infant's lips ! —
Fantastic possibilities of woe
Relieve the heart o'erburthened else, and crushed,
Beneath the mighty happiness of love. —
Depart, unnatural monster of my brain ;
And thou, dread thought, freeze in eternal silence.
Come Night, and hold me in thy dark embrace ;
Lest this unreal shape look forth at the eye,
And palsy Rome with horror !

(*Reënter Aulus.*)

Whence arose

This sudden clamor ?

AULUS.

It was from the square
Before the temple, where the crowd bestow
The armor upon Curtius : — The great noise

Was gratulation at an omen sent ; —
For when the priest advanced to take the casque,
With which to crown the warrior — a flash
Of lightning, darting from a cloud that sailed
Upon the Augurs' left, struck the bright steel,
And at the feet of Curtius tore its way
Through the unyielding earth : And thus they read it,—
“Heaven's own strength shall clothe the arm of Marcus,
And bring confusion to the foes of Rome.”

LYTERIA.

Who thus interprets ?

AULUS.

Dælius, thy father.

LYTERIA.

Why, then, no doubt 't is right : Who is so wise
As Dælius ! who so pure ! — Jove would not blind
His truest servant ; — still Doubt sways my spirit.
Tell me, good Aulus, tell me, may not prayer,
Poured from thy pious lips, and from my sire's,
Compel the heavens to show where safety lies ?

AULUS.

In patient waiting on the will divine,
And still submission, prayer shows meetest now.

LYTERIA.

The order is obeyed, even to the letter ; —
For what has Rome more precious to bestow,
Than the divine similitude of Jove ?

AULUS (*after a pause*).

Dost ask that question ? — Must I then reject
A thought, that as those words fell from thy lips,
Seemed stamped by inspiration on my soul ? —
The cunning labor of man's hand is meet
Oblation to be rendered to his fellow ;
But to Creative Essence we should yield
What its own might has fashioned : — Fruit and flowers,
With blood of guiltless beast, in common times,
May pay the service gratitude demands.
Yet seasons come, when human lust and pride
Blaspheme the patient Gods, till, waked to wrath,
They claim tremendous expiation. — Then,
What the soul most clings to, must be given.

Something, so dear and precious, that the heart,
Torn at its loss, may pour its vital blood, —
And haughty Will, slain on a living altar,
Pay the sole tribute Heaven will accept.

LYTERIA.

Cease such mysterious words ; — for though I see
Not all their meaning, yet I know they wrong .
The Gods we worship. Priests have slandered oft
The power they feigned to reverence !

AULUS.

Sometimes

'T is so ; — but now, an instinct tells my soul,
That unto thee alone, of all our world,
The Gods have shown their pleasure. Do not shrink —
The secret is most safe, if thy wrought brain
Unconsciously has printed it on mine. —
The messenger is chosen ; — and my lips
Are sealed to silence : — yet most blind were we
Not to perceive man's craft, or nature's wealth,
Cannot elaborate *that conscious self* —
The noblest offering we can render Heaven.

LYTERIA.

Hold, Aulus ! — and beware that fatal pride,
Most common to thy order ; — Do not take
Thy own crude fancies for decrees of Heaven.
Such great presumption, weighing down the mind,
(Which piety and study else exalt)
Poisons its teaching, and gives worldly men
Much cause to jeer the ministers of Jove.

AULUS.

Unhappy maiden, whom stern fate elects
To bear a grief beyond thy mortal strength,
'T is not for me to blame the desperate hope,
That burthens human pride, with the clear beams
Of knowledge, shot from heights whence Truth may shine
Without distortion. Every path, my child,
Hath issue there. The common chance of life
Metes out the truth in merciful allotments,
As pain's rude buffets make the growing soul
Strong to receive it. Yet 't is sometimes sent
In one short struggle, whence the youth may rise

To wisdom more sublime, than the hard tasks
Conned 'neath Time's discipline can bring our Age.

LYTERIA.

Such rude uplifting Heaven avert from me !
With meek submission, rather let me seek
To tread the teaching steps of those, whom nature
Appoints my guides.

AULUS.

When beckoned to the sky,
We may not choose the wings to bear us up.
When priests and people read not fate's decree,
When earth and sky are blank to asking eyes,
There is a gentle voice, that to the soul
Interprets Heaven's command. — Does no loved name
Thrill with an awful whisper to thy soul,
While Rome and her sad children, frantic, ask
Which way salvation comes ?

LYTERIA.

Aulus, no more ! —
The Powers who show thee their august demand

Would give support, through human sympathy,
To the great task they urge me to perform :
For that I should be thankful ; — but Despair,
Who holds his lordly session in my breast,
Will brook no gentler feeling.

AULUS.

The stern sense
Of hardly purchased Right exalts us more
Than friendly pity, or the world's applause.
Remember this : and know that Heaven supports
The instrument it chooses. — Some one comes.
Commune some lonely moments with thyself,
And courage shall be given : for, holy maid,
The Gods have chosen well ; — thy innocence
Is strength celestial ; — thou shalt nobly triumph.

LYTERIA.

Yet, give me prayers — prayers — Aulus, lest I faint, —
And so fail utterly. *[Exit Lyteria.]*

AULUS.

Alas ! not less
Rome shall require our prayers, if this young pair

Must perish for her sake.

Strange ! that so hard a task should be assigned
To instruments untried ; while those whose lives
Have daily worshipped Jove are left untested. —
How goes the day ?

(Enter Prothus.)

PROTHUS.

The rites before the throng
Conclude most happily. The well-armed Curtius,
Attended by the Consul and our priests,
Comes to fulfil his marriage. But the bride —
Should she not wait his coming ?

AULUS.

She left me
Upon thy entrance. When the time arrives,
She will be ready. Have the people all
This mien untroubled ? — Is the curse forgot
That rests upon them ?

PROTHUS.

Yes ; the fickle crowd,
Drunken with show and noise, laugh in death's clutch,

And mock the wrath of Heaven ; yet such applause
But little suits with Dælius' sad face,
The grave demeanor of the thinking few,
Or the stern frown that clouds the Consul's brow.

(*Enter Publius.*)

PUBLIUS.

A new response the Oracle has given,
Breathing some hope to Rome. These were the words—
“ *The treasure Jove demands shall be revealed
To the most valued inmate of his temple :* ” —
Thus 't is most like some priest shall be inspired
To signify His will.

PROTHUS.

This seems like hope. —
Have Dælius and our nobles heard thy news ?

PUBLIUS.

I looked to find them here.

PROTHUS.

They now approach.
Come, we will meet them, and announce this message.

Clouds, that now lift to us, should be dispelled
From those whom they oppress with equal sadness.
This is the way —

PUBLIUS.

I follow willingly.

[Exeunt Prothus and Publius.]

AULUS.

This inward warning was not fancy's trick,
But heaven-sent augury. To woman's strength
A trial is assigned, that well might task
Man's less enduring nature, to a point
Beyond its sufferance. Yet can it be
That she has trust and courage firm enough,
For such supreme devotion? Will not her lips,
Glued by a human weakness, fail to speak
The whispered words of Heaven?

(Reënter Lyteria.)

LYTERIA.

Aulus! —

AULUS.

Returned so soon!

LYTERIA.

So soon — Dost thou not know

Life at some seasons keeps no pace with Time —
Hearts may grow cold, and the quick blood of youth
Lag with Eld's sluggish current through the veins,
While the frail insect, born for one short day,
Wakes its first pæan for the gift of life ? —
Yes ! I have learned the message Publius brought :
Answer me not — for I have heard, but now,
Teachings from tongues, more eloquent than thine —
If I am proof to these, thy words are wasted.

AULUS.

Yes ! I believe thy counsel comes from Heaven —
May it still wait upon thee, and reveal
The shrouded love, that deals with man in sorrow ;
And may thy Faith still point thee to a time,
When all that here is doubtful, or obscure,
Shall be unriddled. 'T is the only comfort
Vouchsafed to human suffering.

LYTERIA.

Yet who,

By wishing, can acquire a trust so strong,
That the affections of earth's brightest hours
Shall melt before it ? Reason cannot give
This confidence ; nor comes it from desire
To pierce the gloom, and view the mighty Source
Whence we proceed, and where our being tends.
Such wisdom must be grafted on the heart,
When first 't was waked to life, or gently pressed
Upon the soul, by friends who laid aside
This mortal form to be more closely with us : —
Are the gates opening ? — Do I hear their hinges
Utter a deep wail ; —
As conscious of the destiny of him
Who enters to destruction !

AULUS.

Thou 'rt not deceived.
Our friends already fill the inner court.

LYTERIA.

Tell them, I am prepared ; leave me an instant.

[Exit Aulus.]

Alone, a moment more — before the deed —

And then — alone forever : — Mighty Gods,
Raise and exalt me to my solemn work ; —
Let my weak mind, swayed by your higher wisdom,
Be moulded to your likeness : let me feel
That human love but copies love divine
In aiding general weal, through private grief.

The time has come — His step, cumbered with steel,
Strikes heavily the earth, and dissipates
All power ! — What price too great to hold him here ! —
Here ! to myself ! What interest strong as mine ! —
Cease, cruel Power, that prompts me to this deed !
Elect some higher agent. I am mortal !

(Enter Dælius, Lucius, Publius, Curtius, and others.)

DÆLIUS.

Thy message, Publius comes most happily.
We are not all deserted, if the Gods
Shall deign to speak Rome's comfort by our lips.
We wait their inspiration ; while with hearts
Lightened of half their fear, we join this pair
In marriage ! Daughter ! thy pale cheek should show
Some living color : cease to think of Rome

For this one hour, when life's great epoch stands
Athwart thy path.

LYTERIA.

Forgetfulness is not
In mortal power : and wisely 't is denied ; —
For who would not expunge joy's shadowed trace,
So those dark stains, that mottle life to all,
Might cease to haunt the memory !

CURTIUS.

Canst thou
Remember aught save the rich blessings showered
About our steps ? — the popular applause, —
The favor of our worthiest citizens, —
This honored mail by acclamation given ? —
And now, more sweet than all, the rite that seals
Thee mine forever, banishes all sense,
All feeling, but of rapture !

LYTERIA.

As we deck
The victims destined to our sacrifice,

So fortune sometimes lends us every grace,
When the great doom is nearest. Yet think not
I would obscure the ruddy light that beams
To thy fond hope. — Thus may it ever shine !

CURTIUS.

Thou must not think the lauding tongues of men,
Who may to-morrow strain their throats to hail
Some sycophantic knave, have satisfied
My selfish craving ; 't is that the high place,
Reached through their favor, gives me power to serve
The State, our parent, and to pay those dues
Owed to our race, that have the power above
All selfish joy to make us truly blessed.

LYTERIA.

There spoke the noble spirit I have loved.
Thou still wilt hold this truth e'en as thy life. —

CURTIUS.

Till death shall strike the reason from my brain,
And quench the fire of conscience.

AULUS.

Approach the altar where thy father waits ; —
After the rite there shall be time for converse.

DELIUS.

Ye now appear to consecrate your lives
Each to the other ; — undertaking both
The holiest, tenderest offices that man
May render to his fellow.
But 't is to be remembered that each word,
Each inarticulate thought, is registered
By witnesses unseen. So will the crime
Glare to celestial vision, if firm will
Be wanting to perform all that is promised.

LUCIUS.

What say'st thou, Marcus ? wilt thou take this maid ?
Art thou prepared to love and reverence
Her woman's sense of justice, and the heart,
More prone to sink expedience for the right,
Than that which man must carry ? Hast thou purpose
To listen to her words in hours of trial, —
When Heaven lends to those who love us best

A truer sense than nature ever gives
Our worldly instinct? Say, art thou prepared
To make these promises?

CURTIUS.

The privilege
Of taking such blest vows, I count great cause
Of gratitude.

DÆLIUS.

Placing thy hand upon
This altar, swear, that thou wilt strive to keep
The promises impressed by solemn custom
On all united by the marriage tie. —

Now, daughter, listen what thy duties are : —
'T is thine to cultivate the gentler virtues,
Which, drawing man towards the domestic hearth,
Form his best guard from ill. Strive to be cheerful.
Never disposed to see the passing clouds,
That discontent may find in any sky,
But let thy smile supply the sun of fortune,
When screened by trouble.

LUCIUS.

Likewise be assured,

That we possess no joy for private use ;
But that mankind should share the gifts of Heaven,
Whereof the few are chosen almoners.
Show no weak love in seeking to detain
Thy chief from dangerous honor ; for thou know'st,
That 't is through private suffering the Gods
Heap greatest favors on the multitude.
In fine, be open ; utter fearlessly
Whatever truth may urge. Obey the prompting
Of thy most noble self. So shall thy love
Point Curtius to renown.

DOELIUS.

If thou art prepared
To take these trusts, call the truth-loving Gods
To witness it.

LYTERIA.

No trifling invocation
Should ask such Presence ; — let me give some moments
To silent prayer, before an act so solemn.

DOELIUS.

Upon this altar gently rest thy hand, —

And when prepared, uplift it to the sky ;
Praying the Gods, who register thine oath,
May give thee strength to keep it.

(Enter a Citizen.)

Ha ! who breaks
Our unconcluded service ?

CITIZEN.

Pardon, sir ; —

'Tis not my own desire that interrupts
These sacred offices. The crowd without,
Stricken with panic by a sudden wind,
That bears the noxious vapor from the pit
About this temple, thrust me to your presence,
To learn if Jove has signified the means
Of our deliverance — as we learned to hope.

LYTERIA.

Yes ! — The great inspiration in my breast,
Burning for utterance, makes its instrument
Preëminent in knowledge, as in woe.
The heaven-demanded gift no more is veiled
In doubtful language, but each index points
Its cruel finger where redemption lies.

Father, and you, sir, who deserve that name
From him who calls me wife, give me support
In following your counsels. I have sworn, —
If fate should offer me the bitter choice, —
To hold the honor of the man I love
Above all private feeling. Perjury
To the high Gods ; distrust of him whose choice
Hath touched a life with radiance, should not be
The primal acts of union. — The demand
Made by the Oracle I must expound, —
And, crushing nature, raise our prostrate Rome.

Written on every hand, but strangely dark
To our gross vision, the decrees of Jove
Break on the soul, palled in the wonderment
Of its own blindness. “ *The most precious gift* ” —
Is not the breathing consciousness we hold
As Heaven’s choicest blessing, — Is not *this*, —
A tribute worthier to appease its Source
Than Labor’s produce ? What is “ *prized of Rome* ” ?
Have ye not heard the very pavement shout
As *Curtius* trode the street ? — Do ye not give
The armor that he bears, — and in the light’ning

Foresee his coming fame ? — Must *I* repeat
A name all Rome has clamored ! —

Marcus Curtius,

I, that should crown this day with Love's best gift,
Now point the way to death. Glory has shone
About thy brief career ; — no step of thine
But left its trace of radiance ; — Thou alone,
By modesty prevented as a shield,
Hast walked unconscious : — I, in shade apart,
Have seen the open Heavens beckon thee, —
While Earth yearns for the last embrace of him,
Whose place above is won.

Now ! with one voice,

Ye Romans, shout your safety ; for I crave
The poor approval custom gives brave deeds ! —
Yet first ! break silence *thou* ! of whose support
It would be sin to doubt — Marcus, come hither !
Fold me to thy heart — say, I have done well ! —
Or else thy silence drowns the thousand tongues
That urged me to the deed ! —

No word ! — No breath ! —

Dost thou repel me, and these friends stand fixed

As statues to behold it ! — Fool ! to think
The cunning Gods had yet no pang reserved ! —
I had not looked for this !

(She falls upon the pavement.)

The Act closes.

ACT IV.

A grove near the Temple. — Publius and Aulus discovered.

PUBLIUS.

THE hidden meaning of the Oracle
Was shown to thee, before those awful words
Discovered it to Rome ?

AULUS.

The strife that rent
Lyteria's soul was figured in the mien,
She could not all control. This showed me first
Where pointed Jove's requirement. But such strength
I hardly deemed could rule in woman's breast.

PUBLIUS.

Capacity to serve its high behest,
Heaven measures not as we. Hath she put off

The veil Oblivion lent, to wrap her nature
From Sorrow's chilling touch ?

AULUS.

She wakes to life :
Her spirit now informs the quickened flesh
With suffering ; yet no complaint is breathed ; —
No tear relieves the anguish of the soul ;
But calmness, not of earth, lights her clear brow,
As if the heart nourished a grief too great,
To show such sign as common trouble writes
Upon the visage. Publius, you have watched
The ripening strength of Curtius ; can he tread
This short rough path to glory ?

PUBLIUS.

Who can judge,
From any past experience of the power
To meet such fearful trial ? He was brave,
Noble and generous, when Rome claimed less
His aid, — but in the present case — 't is Jove
Who knows the issue. Still, he walks this grove
With the quick stride that bore him from our sight,

After the broken rite. His face seems stamped
With the hard lines of age ; his eye as fixed
As the blank orb that fails to light the stone,
Which else would breathe as we. No word he speaks
But motions from his side all who approach
With words of courage or of sympathy : —
This have I heard, and now, compelled thereto
By those who love him most, I come to try
If he will waste some speech upon a friend,
He ever claimed to value.

AULUS.

See — he comes :
Such meetings ask no witness : I shall wait
With others in the temple ; — doubting much
If human strength can bear the awful end
Fate thrusts upon him. [*Exit Aulus.*

(*Enter Curtius.*)

PUBLIUS.

I would greet thee, Marcus :
Do not withdraw thy hand from him, whose lips
Should not repeat the proofs of early love,

That well may claim the privilege to soothe
The troubles of thy heart, with sympathy.

CURTIUS.

No pity, Publius, — 't is but empty breath —
No prompting — and no counsel — If my soul,
Crushed with its fetters, has not strength to break
The heavy chain, that fate has cast about me —
I must be ever bound — Nay, friend, no words —
I best may bear my misery — alone.

PUBLIUS.

O, not alone ! for mortal grief unshared
Hath keenest touch. If not to me, to friends
Of better worth, relieve thy burthened heart : —
To summon such, I gladly yield my claim.

CURTIUS.

Well, thou art right : — The truest friend to man
Should be the wife, he chose from all the world.
Send then Lyteria. Say, that I have asked
A little speech with her : — This should suffice.

PUBLIUS.

Most gladly is the office I would take
Left to her lips, new-hallowed by the touch
Of messages celestial, — not alone
Chosen to speak Heaven's judgment, but informed
With the deep consolation love may shed
Upon the mighty mysteries, which at times
Press our cramped sense, until the ignorant mind,
Sickening in blindness, wastes within its cell,
Consumed by its own hunger. She shall come
To share thy grief,—if not to soften it.

[*Exit Publius.*]

CURTIUS.

Here let me wait her coming ; — that the breeze,
Caressing fitfully this glowing cheek,
May cool the fevered tide, that burns its passage.
Let me forget what hopes the morning knew,
And only feel this present wretchedness.
Away, ye burning thoughts, that riot thus
Through the hot brain ; like fiends who clothe themselves
With living flesh, to play their ghastly antics !
She will not come ; she cannot face the husband,
Doomed by her lips, ere pressed with the first kiss

Of wedded passion. Better keep the darkness
She has embraced, than in the light of Heaven
To gaze upon the wreck of him, who seemed
Her dearest part of life: I have known those,
Who scoffed at woman's feeling, boasting loud,
That any specious flattery could win
Her word-creating love. I little thought
To blazon forth the truth of such coarse jests, —
Urged to destruction by a siren voice,
Whose music stole away all manly power
To snare the victim surely. She is here!
Unless the form, oft mirrored in the eye,
Still lingers to deceive. Strange to believe
The dull reflection could survive the love
That warmed it into being.

(Enter Lyteria.)

Dost thou dare
To visit me? — to answer thus my bidding?

LYTERIA.

Yes! at thy will; which, when it speaks command,
It is not less my duty to obey

Than when constrained by love, I could not choose
But answer its behest, unbreathed in words.

CURTIUS.

The service will be brief, prompted by love
Or duty. Time has been, I should have deemed
The longest life just nature could bestow,
As guerdon to the few who keep her laws,
A span too short to measure half the love
I yearned to pour upon thee. When I craved
Advancement, 't was *thy* fame that dazzled most.
When offered place and honor, — when the throng
Threw their unpurchased praises at my feet,
My boyish fancy picturing the while
A greater fame to follow, — 't was thy smile
That lit ambition's boundless sky, — thy love,
That seemed the only prize worthy to bless
A life of struggle.

LYTERIA.

Have *I* suffered nothing ?
Has not full measure of all earthly ill
Been meted to my portion ? — Crushed at last

By thy distrust in that dark hour, when doubt
From thee struck deeper than the angry shafts
That Fate aimed at my bosom:

CURTIVS.

Canst thou speak
Of petty trial, when the soul of him,
Whom thou hast claimed to value as thyself,
Waits on the bank of ruin? — while, alas!
The Sense is unillumed, and reason's lamp,
Given to guide man's instinct, sheds no ray
On Heaven's dark dealings!

LYTERIA.

But that reason warns,
That man should not confine celestial wisdom
To narrow bounds where he may read its purpose.
Marcus! this thought upheld me; — or ere this
My grief had conquered life. When first I bowed
In anguish to the earth, striving to stay
The utterance, that Influence more strong
Than human will claimed from my lips, I breathed
An atmosphere of fire. The ground was moved

Beneath me, while the sun his solemn progress
Quitted, and seemed to reel along his course.
The mighty presence of that misery
Swelled through this frame, and soon had thrust my soul
Forth from its prison to the genial air,
Had not fresh fetters, forged by Jove's own hand,
Bound it anew to earth ; yet raised by aids
Unseen, and in unnatural ecstasy
Borne on, I wrought the will divine. And this
Support, impressed upon my soul, charmed doubt
And mortal weakness : — Man is not allowed
To fathom the great mysteries of Jove,
Nor weigh eternal justice, which regards
With equal survey the whole race of man,
And wills the general welfare : — Nor alone
For mortal interest that Care consults,
But with its blessing vision still enfolds
The countless beings bearing human form,
Fashioned from deathless fabric, which of old
Communed with mortals ; and again may hold
Such sacred intercourse, when later days
Shall find our race redeemed through sufferance
To that pure state, when voices that now call

Us to the skies shall be as plainly heard
As these poor words, wherein I speak of them.

CURTIUS.

Has man no right to question the decree,
That claims the greatest proof our faith can offer ?

LYTERIA.

No ! not the greatest ; — for although the world
Counts every pang that strikes the human breast
In service so conspicuous, and lauds
(As it is meet it should) the champion doomed
In one great act to yield all men most prize —
Yet stronger trust must nourish the long lives
Of those, who, in obscurity and toil,
Receive a poison with each vital draught,
Which still supplies the wasting heart of Want
With energy to suffer ; — Thou hast been
Most blest in golden opportunity
To show the virtue glowing in thy breast —
But think of him, who feels, (it may be,) longing
Strong as thine own for honorable service,
Whose genius claims a place no less exalted,

Than that where thou hast stood ; — yet, bound by fate
To poverty, — or chained, with fetters forged
By sin ancestral, to some feeble frame,
That may not act the mandate of the will, —
Supports through life a spirit vainly striving
With destiny no mortal strength can master.
I have marked men, unpitied and unknown,
Battling, 'gainst hope, with stern adversity ; —
And they have taught me, that to leave the heat
Of our pressed being, drunk with the applause
Of generations, present and to come,
Asks not so great a trust in Heaven's love,
As to endure that being, stripped of all
That makes our bondage pleasant.

CURTIUS.

The soul, filled
With its own misery, pictures as fair
All other forms in which Woe stalks the earth ;
And life, with all its agonies, is still
So precious, that we fondly cling to gross
And sensuous natures, where old Use so ties

The wonted spirit, that it shrinks to leap
Into the unknown future.

LYTERIA.

'T is well said.

There is a chilling coolness in the grave
Which we must fear, even when life's fever burns
Most potently within us : Some rude jar
Must shake us all, when earth's last tie is broke.
And most they feel, who, pushed by Age, or whipped
By licensed vice, are hurried to their doom ; —
But to the agent Jove selects to free
His city from destruction, — the great night
Of breathing nature shall be lit with fires,
Kindled by love in every beating heart,
That thrills with its deliverance. A fame,
The highest man can covet, shall be thine.
So long as Rome's great founder shall be borne
On time's enduring stream, — so long as children
Learn the great justice that stern father dealt
To those whom he had cherished, thy brave name
Shall shine conspicuous. No age can dim
The lustre of such noble sacrifice.

When chiefs of present fame, and bards who sing
Their praises, shall exist but in the earth,
From whose full breast new tribes shall draw support,
Thou still shalt live — immortal as the Right,
Which beckoned thee to Glory !

CURTIVS.

His blood flows
Less warmly than doth mine, who could resist
Such utterance. Lyteria — wife — forgive
The lack of strength, that bred the sin of cursed
Suspicion. Thou art true — true — and most faithful.

LYTERIA.

Speak not of that — but tell me, I am stamped
Once more with love's warm signet on thy heart.

CURTIVS.

I blush that thou shouldst ask. A selfish churl
For some time wore the semblance men call Curtius.
Now the true owner rules. I hear, through thee,
The voice of inspiration, and obey
Its awful mandate. — Yet how strange to choose

One tied to earth thus strongly ! Why take hearts
Beating so quick to life's fresh harmonies,
While thousands, bending beneath age and care,
Pray for the end, unanswered ? To leave thee,
When first I rightly know thine excellence, —
O 't is a fate too hard ! No, — I blench not, —
Yet some complaint must struggle to the air,
When the celestial fountain of such love
Is rudely turned forever from his path,
It leaped from earth to gladden, and to bless.

LYTERIA.

Forever ? No ! 'T were then a cruelty
Beyond all sufferance. Are we not taught,
By instinct strong as that which prompts the bee
To hive the summer sweets, that our advance
By every unchecked impulse to the Truth,
We must possess hereafter ? Each sad step,
By which we slowly climb to those far heights
Of purity and love, where man shall stand
In future more remote than human thought
Can pierce, shall bless us through time's endless path
That all earth's sons must traverse.

Think, what great works man's energy hath wrought,
In this, his primal state ; — the mighty tombs,
Egyptian labor reared to tell the world
Their builders are forgot, — and every form
Of strength or beauty fashioned from the earth,
Must teach, if rightly studied, man's strong will
Shall finally disperse all mists that hang
Before that perfect calm of happiness,
Whereto he was created from the first.

CURTIUS.

In woman, unto whom the Gods allot
Their gravest discipline, they plant a faith
To bear in patience life's long chastisement ; —
But when man's rarer troubles threaten peace,
His soul, unanchored, floats from grief to grief,
Craving a stay denied. Yet to perceive
Such trust, in one elected to a task
Performed so nobly, strikes some kindred spark
In every witness.

See ! thy father comes,
To learn the true fulfilment of thy pledge.

I gladly welcome him.

(*Enter Dælius.*)

Do not recall

Past weakness: Let the word die on thy lip

Unuttered. Self returns. —

The name, bequeathed in honor, still is borne

By him who knows its value. Praise not me,

But give your thanks to her, who merits them—

Does Lucius wait within the Temple still?

DÆLIUS.

Rome's gravest nobles linger in our courts,

And he among them.

CURTIUS.

Does their cooler sense

Receive for truth the new interpretation

Of the dark words given by the Oracle?

DÆLIUS.

Reason, more strong than will, compels all Rome

To marvel at her dulness; slow to hear

What e'en mute nature uttered. She receives

This rendering of the mystic words of fate ; —
We must accept what Heaven clearly speaks.

CURTIUS.

And I accept it also. I delay
Too long already ; — Bring me quickly, then,
To the dark entrance of that fane, whose altar
Hungers to snatch its victim.

LYTERIA.

O, not yet !

Some hours are left us. For yon setting sun
Ceases to draw the vapors from the pit,
That strike at life so surely. Not until
His smile relights the earth, will Plague's foul breath
Taint this pure ether.

DELIUS.

Daughter, thou sayest well.

Some hours are left to spend in that sad parting,
The city claims from this, her noblest son.
Freighted with sacrifice and earnest prayer,
This night shall leave our Temple, where all ranks

Collected, shall have poured their thanks to Heaven,
Who gives not man a destiny so grand,
Without the strength to bear it.

CURTIUS.

Yes — the strength —
It will be — has been — given. And yet to wait,
When every nerve is tense — To gaze at death
Through fevered hours, that creep so slow to watchers —
Well, I can bear this also. — Dælius,
This memory still enfolds thy teaching-past, —
Yet, for an instant, leave the austere speech,
In which your order cloak each throb of passion,
Let me but feel one breath of human pity ; —
One whispered word — not spoke in doubt — but wonder,
At the quick sacrifice your Gods command.
'T will break the cloud, which keeps the sympathy
Bred in thy heart, from giving life to mine.

DÆLIUS.

If these rough cheeks are yet untraced by tears, —
If the voice holds its wonted cadences, —
It is because the heart disdains to give

A grief so great, such impotent expression.
And, partly, that the Power, who leaves old Age
Exposed to shocks that conquer younger hearts,
But rarely calls our tears to answer them.
Still, be assured, that would Jove take my life,
And let my child, and him who sways her breast,
Cling to the Earth, whose perfumes infinite
Pass, unabsorbed, these withered avenues,
That once admitted all the joys of sense,
To feed the ravished soul, — I should await
The end with gratitude. Yet even Youth,
And the fresh love that crowns its sparkling cup,
May find some comfort in the dreaded change,
That ever threatens us. Bethink ye both, —
No cold satiety, which mars our best
Affections, can intrude 'twixt us and those
Departed. They possess our holiest moments.
Our spirits rise in such august communion
As the pure-hearted hold with beings loved ; —
The friend of youth torn early from the earth
Departs in festal garments. He shall not
Support the shrivelled livery of Age,
Which cloaks the fairest forms that linger here

Till night compels repose. No cloud is sent
That does not hide some blessing.

CURTIUS.

The soul, wrapt
In her despair, rejects all human comfort !
Divorced from Earth ! Who can resign the form
Through which we hold our treasure, and yet feel
A claim to it survives ? But man can quell
Such doubting : — and I do it ; — For the Will,
Which conquers gates of brass and battlements,
That melt Time's clutch to love's caress, should sway
The subject mind. I only know the city
Demands my life — I feel the privilege
Of such high service. To the Temple, then,
There to announce my purpose, and begin
The solemn service, fit for the last night
Of Rome's distress. But, dearest, come not thou ; —
I must not see thee, standing pale and fair,
Amid the throng who only should behold
Such sternness as becomes their chosen chief.
Thy spirit, love, is weary, though undaunted ;
Seek quiet, and if rest cannot approach,

Strength shall be given through stillness ; —
When dawn shall tint the east, we meet once more.
Farewell — thy prayer, thy love, shall nerve my heart —
I will believe no parting is forever.

[*Exeunt Dælius and Curtius.*

LYTERIA.

Yes ! — we have parted : — Now the stifled sob
May join the dirge, that through these wind-swept pines
Bewails the perished day : — Why flow these tears
Denied in greater need ? Is he not true
Even as love imaged him ? Yes ! I have gained
All — all — the Gods commanded !

The brave chief,
Fighting to save his country, little recks
The wound where life fast ebbs. And thus to me
Feeling was sunk in action, — but that o'er,
The buried shaft wakes the dulled sense to torture.
“ No parting is forever ! ” But the change
Wrought in our higher state, — that is my dread.
Will he not there exceed all earthly progress,
And so be far removed from all *I* feel,
When called to join him ? I ask not a purer,

A nobler soul, than here possesses Marcus, —
But for himself, unstripped of e'en the faults,
That hang about him, and endear to one
Conscious of kindred weakness.

Yet such thoughts

But little fit the delegate of Jove,
Whom Heaven itself shall succor. Men will speak
My constancy ; and praise a sacrifice
So dead'ning. Praise of men ! — Why do I try
Such empty comfort ? In those burning hours,
When first my love was answered, — how despised
The censure or the praise of all save him !
O cruel fate ! — to grant such thrilling joy,
As youth's quick fancy hardly dared to dream,
And then to tear it from the quivering heart
Fed by its presence ! — I may save him yet,
By hurrying to the Temple to deny
The awful inspiration ! —
And, with some frantic gesture, or rude cry,
Shout to the crowd, that not the voice divine,
But madness spoke this last demand of Jove ! —
Could wasting fasts, or heaven-wearying prayer,
Gain pardon for such sin ? No — crime like this,

Mocking all expiation, still would dog
Our flying steps — itself a great avenger.

Ye helping beings, whom, unseen, I feel
In the soft breath of evening, gently bear me
Through the dark path I travel. Till the last,
May every selfish feeling be subdued
To *his* support and comfort. And O Thou!
Whose ways we know so little, yet whose love
We feel, but cannot fathom — save thy child
In this first night of wedlock, — and the last!

End of Act IV.

ACT V.

The Forum. — The Gulf is seen at the back — a broken Altar on the right. Time — before sunrise. Prothus and Aulus discovered.

PROTHUS.

WHAT mockery ! To wreathe with flowers the shrine,
Shivered by Him for whom its victims bled.

AULUS.

Nay, from the altar touched by Jove's great wrath,
When first it shook the earth, thanks for the grace
That now redeems our lives, may well ascend.
Place here the fruit ; — this fallen bud must join
Its blooming sister ; — so — all things are done,
As Dælius commanded : —

Does no sign
Of morning tint the east ?

PROTHUS.

Yes, a faint gray,
The herald of the dawn, struggles with darkness.
The moon grows paler ! It should near the time
When our sad priests lead Curtius to the place,
His deed shall consecrate. The noisome mists,
Now harmless, weighed to earth, rise with the sun,
And shut from Rome his daily benediction. —
Then, must the gift be offered. Will the bride
Witness the sacrifice ?

AULUS.

While Curtius treads
The bitter remnant of his glorious path,
She will be with him ; — even to the gulf
Where she must pour her being. None can tell,
If Fate, that forfeits her best life to Rome,
Will grant a poor remainder, and permit
The widowed heart to waste through years of silence,
Or lavish (prodigal in sacrifice)
A gift unasked by Heaven.

PROTHUS.

Well hast thou read
Her purpose. — She is here — What deadly calm
Broods on her marble brow ! Such trust is not
Of earth's philosophies ; it is His gift,
Who calls the soul to trial. Mark her eyes ;
They seem to gaze where Cynthia's light aids not
Their delicate function.

AULUS.

She is still upheld
By an unearthly presence, which exalts
Nature to bear its agonies with patience.

(Enter Lyteria.)

Daughter, we would say, welcome — but the word
Melts into air unuttered ; for thy approach,
More than the blushing east, tells of the day
Rome dreads — yet longs to know.

LYTERIA.

Dismiss all greeting :
In sacred silence, rather, mark with me,

How Heaven's vast machinery, unswayed
By mortal grief, hymns its august contriver !
Its majesty of motion is not urged
By the sharp cry wrung from the drowning wretch,
Who gasps for day to clutch the plank of safety ;
Nor can those, dreading light that brings them darkness,
Stay for a single instant Phœbus' wheels
In their appointed course. Yet we, who feel
What great necessity rules nature's force,
Must know a peace sublime, and every heart
Should tame its pulses to that solemn beat,
Which strikes the measure in the constant march
Of universal order.

AULUS.

Thy brave words
Declare the night has wrought a holy comfort.
Earth's baffled hopes and disappointed loves
Are our best teachers. They exalt the soul,
(So we receive them rightly,) and refine
Our grosser passion to such pure desire,
As shrinks from sense, to know its best fulfilment.

LYTERIA

How many sleepers, plagued by fevered dreams,
Have been the sport of fancies black as mine ;
Yet soon the sun, waking our world to gladness,
Dispels these visions ; so a day shall come,
In whose pure brightness mine must all dissolve,
And I shall know their meaning.

AULUS.

Thy soul is borne
Above the woes of sense. May nothing call
It earthward, to resume its painful vesture !

PROTHUS.

The air teems solemn music, such as waits
Our greatest captains to their monuments.
A throng of eager life, in confused mass,
Crowds to this place. The ancient steel, so long
Unused, gleams at the front. Rome's noblest son
Supports it !

LYTERIA.

Yes ! 'Tis true. Leave me not, Aulus—
A chill steals through me — Night's dank dew

Strikes on my cheek ; or is 't Fear's icy touch
That chills me ! Help me now, ye ministers
Of strength, whom I believe are near ! An hour gone —
There 's nothing left to pray for. —

*(Enter Curtius, Lucius, and Dælius, followed by priests,
nobles, and a crowd of citizens.)*

LUCIUS.

Marcus, thy hand ;
I could not clasp it with a greater pride,
If reddened by the blood of every foe
Who doubts our Roman valor. Had thy sire
Lived to behold *this* deed, paling those feats
Which wreathed thy boyish brow with leaves of oak,
He would have wept, even as I do now,
With joy to bless the nobleness he fathered.

DÆLIUS.

Though faintly sounds the weak applause of men,
To that approving voice within the soul,
Whose praise out-tongues all flattery, — yet must Rome
Show sign of gratitude ; — lauding herself
In her most valued son. Thou art blest, Marcus —

Blest in each breath our people safely draw. —
Give grateful echo with your voices, friends,
To what I poorly speak in your behalf.

(Great shouting.)

CURTIUS.

Your favor is most welcome ; yet let it speak
Only in whispered prayer, for strength to leave
All I have cherished here, to Rome's protection.
Give me such heavy moments as remain,
To breathe some words of parting to the heart,
That first declared the ransom Heaven ordained.

Once more let me regard thee. — Nay — expose
Thy features to the placid light that smooths
Time's furrows, or the deeper lines of grief.
I would impress thee in my memory ;
So when the sense, which feeds upon thee here,
Be pressed 'neath death's cold signet, (as it shall,)
A kind remembrance may restore thy form,
As now 't is pictured, and to my waked soul
Temper the strangeness of futurity.

LYTERIA.

The flowers that spring to bless our earthly walk
Breathe their rich odors through Night's thickest veil —
Then, never doubt the spirit hath a sense
To hold what once it loved ; although the cheek
That glowed affection's answer wastes in death,
Or pales through weary years of solitude.

CURTIUS.

Yes ; as the soul draws near enfranchisement,
Truth is revealed that life's thick fancies screened.
No longer racked by superstitious fear,
I feel a calmness as the stroke descends,
To sever earth's strong tie ; — inspired to know
That Love may warm the icy stream of death,
And fill the timorous heart with trustfulness.

LYTERIA.

'T is not unlike that as we leave this clay
Whose aches and mortal need have sometimes turned
Man's love to fretful doubt, we shall divest
The soul from all the grossness which prevents
That perfect union — the young dream of love —

Earth was not meant to realize. Our brave deeds
Shall *there* attest passion's exalting power,
Which here is often wrecked on honeyed speech,
That tells our love — not lives it.

CURTIUS.

Yet Rome knows

'T was no inglorious life I purposed here,
Draining existence from the unpaid earth :
Each day would have recorded some new act,
That thou hadst hailed exulting.

LYTERIA.

'T was well planned. —

Such life must be eternity's best prelude. —
Yet, deem not the great purposes unwrought,
In this our primal state, fail of their fruitage.
Think, rather, each desire shall know fulfilment,
When, in its own dim twilight, melts the earth,
And the bright flash that shows the Thunderer's face
Shall display work of greater nobleness,
Than by the shrouded light that guides us here
Our sense can look on.

CURTIUS.

Words of hope suit well

The breaking day, which lends a radiance
To plainest robes borne on the breast of nature.
The bird's sweet matin rings so full of life,
That man must learn contentment in those notes,
Which charm to sleep each doubting thought of death,
With Heaven's persuasion.

LYTERIA.

The young dawn

Gives freshness to the earth with such large bounty,
That all must drink some portion of the trust
Which fills with calmness the unreasoning world ;
Yet as the east warms to its coming lord,
I feel it draws such color from my cheek,
As the stern night has left. But do not heed
This paleness ; for the blood, leaving the face,
Flies warmly to the heart, giving it strength
To suffer.

AULUS.

'Gainst my will, I must announce
The moment of thy glory. — Clearest stars

Dissolve themselves in light, and the foul breath
Of Earth, hungry for havoc, soon will rise.
The Consul, and the Father of thy wife,
Wait at the altar ready to pronounce
Rome's last farewell and blessing.

CURTIUS.

I am prepared
To meet them, though the sun yet faintly shows
His coming.

Ye grave men — whom I have served
In toils that blessed themselves — by whose applause
My youth was schooled to action — ye who show,
Through the forced sternness which forbids the face
From imaging the heart, that human fondness,
By custom nourished, cannot all be crushed
Even when Heaven wills it ; — Briefly speak
The words of parting ; — or, still better, clasp
This hand in silence, — 't is our best farewell.

DELIUS.

Silence may well be ours, — since Time's deep voice,
Which ever speaks with truth's grand emphasis,

Shall, in its mighty chorus, swell thy name
Down through the listening ages. Noble men
Shall deem their honor surest, when, like thee,
They yield themselves an offering for their race.
And not alone the sacrifice of life
Shall give this glory. — He who strives to cleanse
The time from popular error, — He who speaks
Against some blighting wrong which men delight
To cherish, — these brave souls, — scoffed and despised
By those for whom they labor, — shall receive
Thy name as highest praise, when other times
Shall hail *their* sacrifice, as Rome hails thine.

CURTIUS.

If in your memory my name shall live,
Let it be joined with hers who nobly spoke
The words of Heaven, and urged me to fulfil them.
If she had blenched, — I had not stood here now.

LUCIUS.

Woman's brave deeds are never recompensed
From the world's mint of homage. She receives
Only the praise (too oft but faintly spoke)

Of him she leads to honor ; for her sphere
Is far removed from the red field of Life,
Where Man is formed to combat. They are few
Who read in Fame's bright chronicle of worth
Unwritten praise of that devoted friend
Who smoothed the path of duty. Yet though the world
To greatest action still denies applause,
We, who have known Lyteria, must proclaim
Such nobleness the richest legacy
Our champion leaves the city he has saved.

DÆLIUS.

See, yonder threatening cloud is edged with fire,
Showing the sign of promise, — while it tells
The time has come for parting.

CURTIUS.

I accept
The omen. — Ye tried friends, adieu. — Adieu,
Fair city, for whose sake I had been proud
To live. And thou — no — no — a last farewell
Shall never pass between us. — We shall meet —
And for no separation : — Whence this thrills

Through all my lightened being is unknown ;
But as our sense closes to sounds of Earth,
Voices divine strike inward :

Now the mist

Steals upward. The dark shroud awaits a tenant ;
I wrap myself in its malignant folds —
The latest victim it shall snatch from Rome !

LYTERIA.

Nay, but an instant ; — One last look of love —
No ! I will stay thee not. Phœbus is yet
Concealed — Yon ruddy beam, that faintly tints
The cloud, shoots not from his bright chariot ! —

DÆLIUS.

Hold him not, daughter, whom the Heavens call.
Thou hast been brave ; let not our mortal fear
Seize on thee now, to dim the former trust,
Which sheds a lustre on the sacred act,
That shall redeem us from the wrath divine.

LYTERIA.

Yes ! I am well reminded — Curtius — go —

Nay — I will lead thee to the embrace of fame,
Which woos thee to herself. Look not on me —
A worthier mistress claims Rome's noblest son !
Yes — I am happy — Do not say farewell —
But — Marcus — leap to glory !

*(As the sun rises, Curtius plunges into the gulf, which
closes upon him. Lyteria remains motionless for some
moments, and then falls upon the earth.)*

LUCIUS.

Jove receives
Our offering. — The city lives again, —
And not too dearly are the Gods appeased.
While from this altar thanks are rendered Heaven,
Let every ransomed bosom echo them.

AULUS.

Pray you, regard Lyteria ; see, she falls —
The poisoned shaft, unspent, has struck her life.

PROTHUS.

Nay, 't is but faintness, she will breathe again —

For sorrow, ever impotent in death,
Still moulds the face.

AULUS.

I fear the final sigh
Has parted those white lips.—Who would recall her !

DÆLIUS.

I—I must claim her being. Dearest child,
Sole comforter and solace of my age,
Leave me not thus — A little longer bless
This fainting soul. Give not such bitter end
To the spent life, which deadens at thy absence. —
Ye Gods, whom I have worshipped — spare me this !

LUCIUS.

Be patient, Dælius : Still she seems to breathe —
She will be spared to thee. See, this bright blade,
Held to her lips, is tarnished.

DÆLIUS.

No, 't is dulled
But by the hand that clasped it. She is gone !

Creator Jove, by whose command the fibres
Of this worn heart enclosed another being,
Pardon the prayer o'erburthened nature spoke !
Be dumb, thou mighty grief ; — lest the still air
Repeat my cry to the escaping soul,
And call it back to suffer. Here I bend
To Heaven's will. — I am forsaken.

LYTERIA, *

(Supported by Lucius and Aulus, seems to hear the last words of her Father. She slowly revives, looks tenderly upon Dælius, and, after some moments, raises herself and speaks.)

Not so,

My father ; I return to lend what light
Affection may bestow to the dulled sense
Of age. Forgive thy child, that, stunned by grief
So bitter, the rash soul, striving with Fate,
Shook off the chain that binds us all to earth,
And clinging to *his* heart, which held its life,
Rushed to the verge of being. I have neared
Those precincts, where none tied to carnal life
May enter. But some influence repelled

The soul, not destined to put off its poor
Mortality. Yet brought so near the state
Of the enlightened, I have drunk their teachings.
I saw the blessedness of him, who serves
The majesty of conscience with his life,
And yields what, in the name of Deity,
This monitor demands. Some must endure
The torture of the flesh, destined to wean
Man from the life he clings to ; — Others, called
By duty, bare the breast to the quick shaft,
Which ever seeks the savior of his race ; —
And those there are, who meekly must perform
An unapplauded service of the soul,
And wait for time's release.

The grief of Rome
Called for the death of Curtius : — The last years
Of him whom most I reverence, and the care
That I am blessed to render those cast out
From the world's sympathy, demand my being.
Duty — not self-imposed — asks man's submission.
With what devotion *he* discharged his part,
Ye are the witnesses. Pray that some share

Of his great strength descend upon the heart
Chosen from all the world to know him best.
Our Curtius died for Rome. Receive thy child ;
Father ! — *I live for thee.*

THE END.



FROM THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, No. CLXVI.

Lyteria: A Dramatic Poem. Boston: Ticknor and Fields.
1854. 16mo. pp. 123.


* * * * THE drama of *Lyteria* claims the specific title of a classical composition; that is, in subject, simplicity of plot, limitation of the number of personages and of the time of the action, it resembles the tragedy of the ancients. The tragedy of *Ion*, which gave the late lamented Talfourd his eminent position as a poet, belongs to the same class; and we are happy to say that the production of our young countryman sustains no unfavorable comparison with the exquisite work of the laurelled scholar, whose genius adorned the bar, the bench, the House of Commons, and the stage.

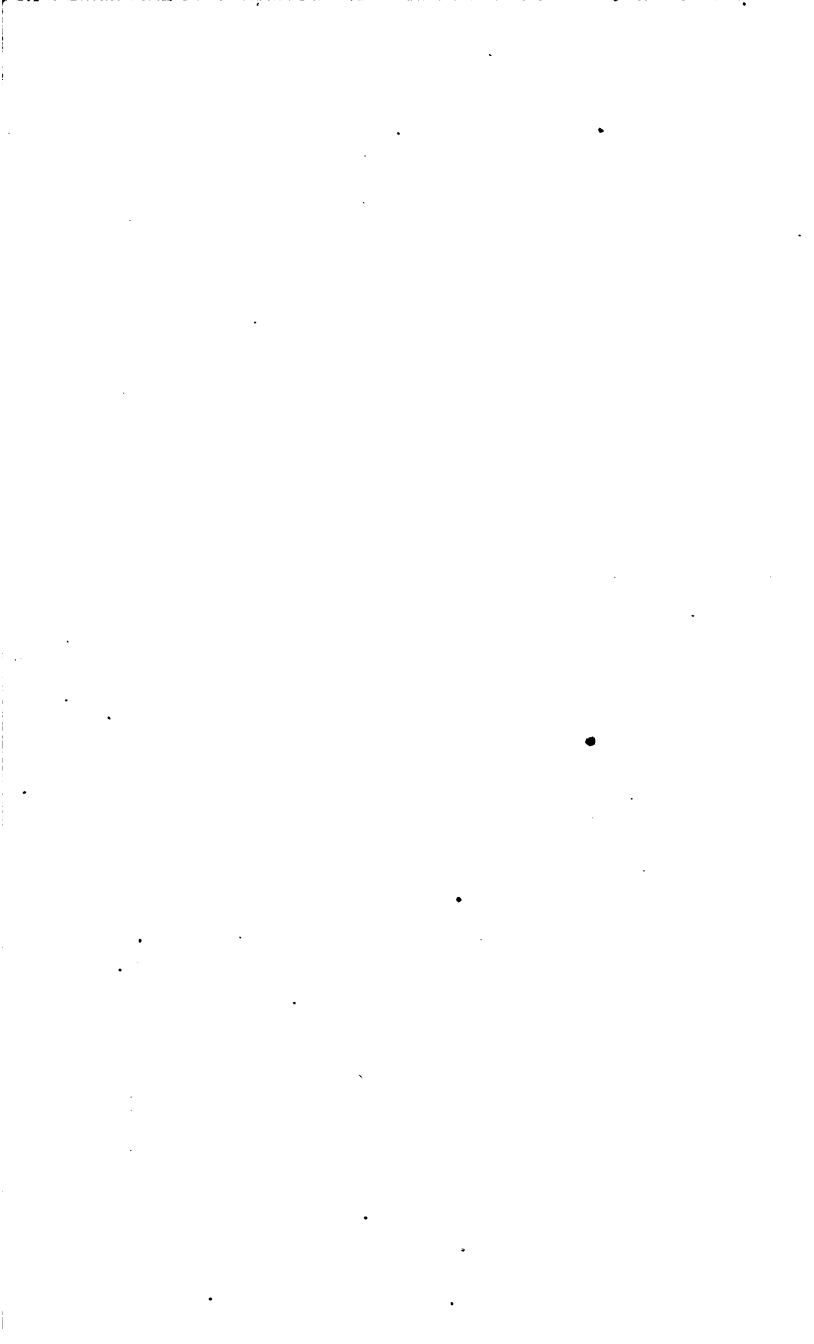
In reading *Lyteria*, we are reminded of *Ion*, but only by those general similarities which grow out of the circumstance that they both are constructed upon the same principles of classical composition, and both have kindred excellences of style. *Lyteria* has borrowed nothing in sentiment or imagery from *Ion*; but resembles it in the easy and fluent verse, the finished rhythm, the elegant simplicity of language, and the purity of ethical tone, as also in the high conception of dramatic art with which the author has carefully and thoughtfully executed his plan.

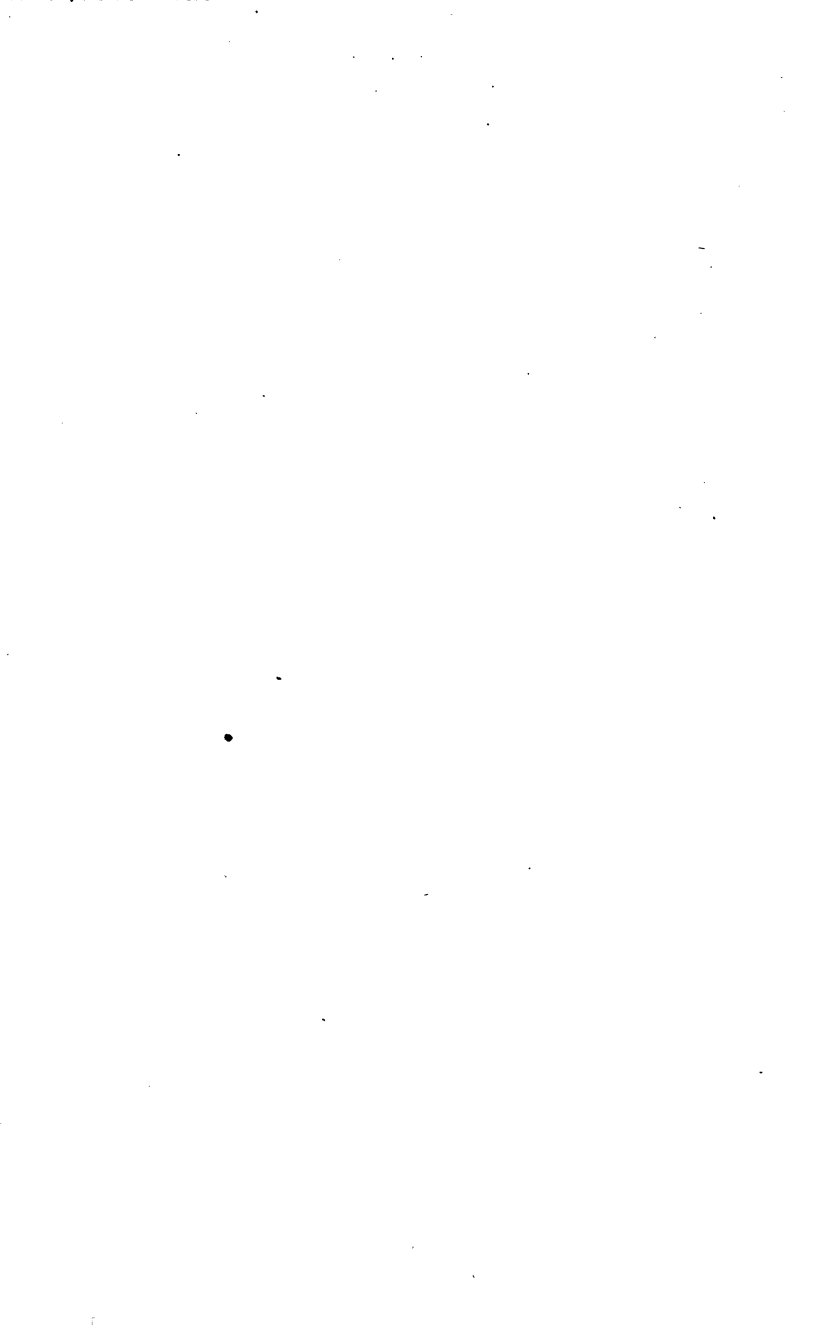
The legend of Marcus Curtius is one of the commonplaces of classical allusion; but the manner in which this germ is unfolded into a dramatic story, and shaped into a plot adequate to high tragic effects, and affording situations for the display of the loftiest heroism and the tenderest human affection, is not only ingenious, but original. *Lyteria* is the daughter of Dælius, an aged priest; and Marcus Curtius, having vindicated the ancestral honors of his lineage by early deeds of arms, is received as an inmate in the temple. Two such natures—the heroic and noble character of Curtius, and the deep, devout, and tender spirit of *Lyteria*, nurtured in the sacred air of worship, and shedding by her beauty the light of grace on the austere solemnities of the Roman religion—could not be brought into each other's presence without soon finding that each is the predestined companion and complement to the other. The highest happiness of man's condition on earth seems within their grasp when the full consent of the Patrician guardian of Curtius is freely given. But the gods have willed for them another destiny. A gulf has been supernaturally opened in the Forum, out of which issue poisonous vapors, sending pestilence through the devoted city. Astonishment, terror, death, strike the wretched people, and fill the nobles and priests with dismay, at this inexplicable outburst of the wrath of the gods. The oracle is consulted, and, by its ambiguous response, gives a false hope that the divine anger may be readily appeased. But no; the precious treasure furnished by the Consul, and even the silver statue

of Jupiter, upheaved from its firm base, and thrown into the abyss, are hurled back on the trembling plain. What, then, is the sacrifice, — that which is “most prized of Rome,” — to which the oracle mysteriously points? Curtius himself is the selected victim; and Lyteria, to whom he is just betrothed, is the chosen messenger through whom the will of the gods is to be conveyed to Rome. The manner in which the meaning of the oracle is gradually made clear to Lyteria, by mental impressions produced by the gods, and coincidences of words accidentally spoken with the mysterious language of the response, is highly poetical, and, though supernatural, perfectly natural. This species of management is in accordance with the practice of the best Greek tragic writers. The classical reader will remember the exquisite art of Sophocles, in the *Œdipus Tyrannus*, who unconsciously foreshadows, by his own language, the fatal secret he is endeavoring to bring to the light of day. The author of *Lyteria* has made a somewhat different, but very delicate and skilful application, of the classical method. The coincidence of the words by which Curtius is saluted, at the moment of his apparent triumph, with the language of the oracle, surely and awfully reveals the truth to the startled consciousness of Lyteria, whose situation now becomes one of the most pathetic and tragical which the human mind can conceive. The conduct of the drama through this part of the story affords, we think, a test of the ability of the author; and we find that he has come triumphantly out of the trial. There is a steady maintenance of the interest of the struggle, and a calm, quiet exhibition of power, in bringing out the points of the crisis, which nowhere breaks down or fails. The communication of the fatal truth to the lover and hero is another of the great turns in the fortunes of the piece, equally demanding steady power to carry it successfully through; and the tragic consummation by which Rome is saved, and Curtius, at the cost of life, and love dearer than life, wins his place among the demigods of ancient renown, sustained to the last dread moment by the gentle but most heroic soul of her whose sacrifice is infinitely harder than his to bear, is wrought out with a justness of feeling, fineness of taste, and vigor of hand, fully equal to the requirements of high tragic art.

The characters in the drama are distinctly and consistently drawn, while the relations of the thought and the appropriateness of sentiment to character and situation are sustained with a subtle delicacy quite remarkable. The character of Lyteria is a noble and exquisite creation, uniting, as it does, the most womanly affections with high heroic qualities, as far transcending the heroism of man, as the struggles of the soul surpass the daring deeds of the battle-field, or the yielding up of the idol of the heart surpasses the yielding up of life for a great cause, — as to live for duty after life has lost its charm is more heroic than to die and be at rest. We think the elements of this character are combined with true poetic feeling, and exquisite artistic skill. * * * * *











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